Embodied Knowing:
Subjectivity, Trauma, and the Body

by

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Class of 2019

A thesis (or essay) submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Philosophy
Introduction

I became interested in embodied practice and academic philosophy separately, although these interests converged over the course of my time at Wesleyan. I began practicing yoga during my freshman year and began meditating seriously during the spring of my sophomore year. My encounter with yoga and meditation as practices has taken place primarily in the context of lineage: first, ashtanga vinyasa yoga, as taught by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, and later Japanese Zen, both Rinzai and Sōtō, in several different monasteries. The way these practices are framed struck me as similar. Both operate within an epistemological framework that is unacknowledged in Western academic culture. My teachers from both traditions shared a basic supposition, which is that intellectual understanding is practically useless in the context of yoga and meditation; you cannot reason your way out of mental suffering. Their recipes involve the training of the entire human organism, largely through embodied practice, into a new way of being in the world. Pattabhi Jois, one of the most famous yoga teachers of the 20th century, was renowned for his statement “99% practice, 1% theory,” (Slater). This was the answer he gave to students who asked heady metaphysical questions rather than focusing on the practice of asanas (postures). Japanese Zen emerges out of a quite different contemplative tradition, but also views the body as the source of a powerful kind of understanding.

I returned to Wesleyan for my sophomore year after spending the summer studying yoga in Mysore. I was struck by the dissonance between the epistemological frame I returned to and the one I had just come from. In one, bodily understanding
and intelligence was supreme; in the other, ignored. I noted that many of my classes involved the deconstruction of problematic ways-of-knowing and ways-of-seeing inherited from colonial or neo-colonial practices, but the academic approach itself was hardly questioned. The importance of recognizing our identity, social location, and the kind of body we occupy was acknowledged. Narratives of universality were shunned in favor of partial and locally situated conceptions of truth. Despite these tokens offered towards bodily experience, there remains no practice of actually integrating bodily experience and academic work; very little time is actually spent, expressly at least, exploring or even acknowledging first-person experience of the body. Or rather, the role of this “contemplative” work in academia is not acknowledged. Our conception of academic productivity and the learning process are largely unchanged by post-colonial critique.

Despite this lack of acknowledgement, the embodied experience of Western academics is highly curated, managed, and regulated to ensure the production of certain kinds of knowledge. There is a perhaps unconscious recognition of what kind of habitat and practices are necessary to take care of the body to best function as an elite intellectual. My mother is a professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. She was recently invited to spend a year at Stanford working at their Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences. I visited the Center and was struck by the similarity of the design to that of a monastery. The building was secluded from the rest of the campus on top of a hill. The surroundings were serene. Each professor has a small office space to themselves, a kind of cloister, but must
emerge once a day at lunch where they exchange ideas in a casual setting. The food at CASBS consists of organic salads and grains. There is free coffee, tea, and light desserts. The professors eat moderately and discuss their work, social and political issues, and the pragmatics of professional life. They share knowledge of teaching technologies, note-keeping devices, and all manner of tools and practices which facilitate the embodied life of a professor. Much of what is gained by spending time at a place like CASBS is implicit, embodied knowledge about how to perform the academic life.

In continental philosophy and the fields that have emerged from it there is a movement to take seriously the role of the body in intellectual work. This recognition is essential, but to fully re-encounter the body will require that we take seriously the traditions of embodied practice as tools for cultivating certain kinds of embodied knowing. Embodied practices were created as technologies of liberation, but what exactly this liberation is and how it works is difficult to explain in terms that make sense in Western philosophy. Through this thesis, I develop a framework to describe and account for the kinds of bodily knowledge that emerge through social and environmental conditioning, trauma, professional training, and embodied practices. I conceive of this framework, which I will call embodied knowing, as a tool for readers to think with and live into; the strength of this argument lies in the effectiveness of the category as a way of seeing rather than as any strong claim about what the world or the human-being is. I am not making any ontological, metaphysical, spiritual, or religious claims, other than perhaps that the body is a key
to understanding. I aim to bridge the epistemological disconnect between traditions of embodied practice and academic philosophy. To do this will require the careful negotiation between radically different epistemological frameworks and recognition of the colonial and neo-colonial histories of oppression involved with maintaining certain kinds of knowledge as superior. Even if a reader does not buy this argument, embodied knowing offers a new perspective on existing problems in philosophy and critical theory. It gives us language to perceive new forms of oppression, as well as the tools to liberate ourselves from these and existing modes of oppression. It gives us language to describe how bodily conditioning is instrumental to creating certain ways of perceiving the world, and that intellectual work cannot be disconnected from this process. I hope to build out this story using a variety of accounts in contemporary cognitive science, meditation research, trauma research, and social and critical theory to give an image of what it might look like for an academic culture to take embodied knowing seriously.
Outline

I. **The Embodied Mind:** I discuss *The Embodied Mind* in detail, laying out the authors’ exposition of cognitive realism, its faults, and then their own model of cognition, the enactive approach. I outline their effort to bring Buddhist thought into dialogue with Western cognitive science. **Pg. 6**

II. **The Body Keeps the Score:** I look at the implications of Bessel van der Kolk’s research on trauma for how we conceive of the human body-mind. I use this to conceive of “embodied knowing.” **Pg. 22**

III. **The Body and Discipline:** I explore the potential for *embodied knowing* to develop the work of contemporary theorists and philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Natasha Myers, Stacy Alaimo, and Donna Haraway. **Pg. 56**

IV. **Dharmic Perspectives on Embodied Knowing:** I discuss the philosophical foundation for *embodied knowing* as its used in Dharmic traditions, focusing on Rajiv Malhotra’s text *A Dharmic Critique of Western Universalism*. **Pg. 76**

V. **Reversing the Gaze:** I consider the effects of *embodied knowing* for how we conduct and frame contemporary meditation research and reverse the gaze to consider notions of truth in contemporary discourse. **Pg. 95**
Chapter 1. The Embodied Mind

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch provide a philosophical foundation for this thesis in their text *The Embodied Mind*. In it, they address the disconnect between current attitudes towards the mind in the scientific community and lived experience. A representational view of the mind leaves us with an inevitable disconnect between conscious, lived experience and the underlying structure of cognition. For them, this is not just an uncomfortable conclusion, but a philosophically untenable one. The authors propose instead what they call an *enactivist* approach to cognition, in which brain, body, and world collectively “enact” the mind through continuous dynamic interaction, (Varela 9). The enactive approach has since grown into burgeoning area of study within philosophy of mind and cognitive science, now called “Embodied Cognition” or “4E Cognition.” In this, their text was highly successful. And yet, one of the primary arguments made by Thompson, Varela, and Rosch is a critique of a disembodied approach to cognitive science. They argue for the need to take traditions of embodied practice seriously as an essential vehicle for both understanding the mind and integrating the challenging findings of cognitive science into lived experience. They are critical of the “limited and unsatisfactory” nature of “the current style of investigation” into the mind, calling for a “direct, hands-on, pragmatic approach to experience with which to complement science,” (Varela lxiv). For them, mindfulness meditation offers this technology. This portion of their argument was less successful. I will consider Thompson, Varela, and Rosch’s view of cognition, how this supports their argument for embodied practice as
integral to intellectual work, and why the later half of their argument broke down.
Their work serves as a framework out of which I will build my own argument, which
will hopefully strengthen and continue to develop theirs.

**Cognitivism**

Cognitivism has been the dominant view in cognitive science since its
inception as a field. It was formulated around the notion that the mind functioned like
a computer. The guiding intuition around which the field was structured was that
“each neuron was… a threshold device, which could be either active or inactive. Such
simple neurons could then be connected to one another, their interconnections
performing the role of logical operations so that the entire brain could be regarded as
a deductive machine,” (Varela 39). While it quickly became apparent that the literal
conception of a neuron as a threshold device was not feasible, efforts to determine
how the brain mimicked computation and represented information became the
dominant mode of research. The effort to develop computers that could mimic the
human mind, and to determine the computational properties of the brain, were the
primary tasks. This model continues to inform the way many cognitive scientists
think about the mind.

The deeper argument here is that human intelligence and consciousness
function by representation. What makes a computer a computer is its ability to hold
and manipulate symbolic representations of information. “Computation is an
operation that can be carried out or performed on symbols (on elements that represent
what they stand for),” (Varela 40). Cognitivists believe that “intelligence - human intelligence included - so resembles computation in its essential characteristics that cognition can actually be defined as computations of symbolic representations,” (Varela 40). The cognitivist research program becomes an effort to map the relationship between physical brain states and mental states, as well as how physiological processes cause behavior. Its goal is to show “how [mental] states are physically possible,” as well as “how they can cause behavior,” by determining the way the brain holds and manipulates symbolic information, (Varela 41). All phenomenological experience “consists of physical, symbolic computations” and “cognitive science becomes the study of such cognitive, physical symbol-systems,” (Varela 41). Consciousness is a representation presented by the brain of an underlying process of computation or symbol manipulation.

Thompson, Varela, and Rosch problematize cognitivism in a variety of ways. If cognition works via representation, then there must be a symbolic level to the brain which represents information, thereby creating our felt sense of consciousness. This symbolic level may be made of electrophysiological components, which then must have a “language” by which they communicate, necessitating a third layer of consciousness, which is semantic in nature, (Varela 42). This had led researchers to search for a “language” of thought, which has so far been a largely unsuccessful project. Beyond this, a common critique of the cognitivist view is that “we have no idea how the symbolic expressions supposed by the cognitivist to be encoded in the brain would get their meaning,” (Varela 42). There is a question of why humans feel
like they are conscious and the world has meaning, whereas the “meaning” of a computational system is supplied by an outside observer. Additionally, it is not clear that all semantic distinctions in human language can be represented syntactically, (Varela 42). Certain nuances in human communication, such as tonality and irony, turn out to be incredibly difficult to interpret or encode representationally.

By far the most profound critique offered by Varela and his co-authors is that of sub-personality, or the “mind-mind problem.” If cognition relies on the notion of representation, we must “postulate mental or cognitive processes of which we are not only unaware but we cannot be aware,” (Varela 49). This means that the way the mind actually works, and what it “actually” consists of, is invisible to us, because consciousness is only a representation of the actual “hardware” of the brain. A person, therefore, cannot “discern in conscious awareness or self-conscious introspection any of the cognitive structures and processes that are postulated to account for cognitive behavior… none of us has any awareness of computing in an internal, symbolic medium when we think,” (Varela 49). Cognitivism requires a hard divide between the “personal” and “sub-personal” domains of cognition. The former includes the entire felt experience of being conscious, while the underlying symbolic machinery produces this feeling. What is truly happening is by definition inaccessible. The world itself, everything we are ever capable of experiencing, is only a representation of a “true” reality. We may be “condemned to act as a self that cannot be found in a world we cannot access,” (Varela 143). This is an emotionally jarring conclusion, but for some philosophers, that is okay. The view is this; our
intuitive sense of ourselves must not necessarily line up with how the world actually is. Therefore, we are justified in ignoring our natural intuitions and proceeding to map the sub-personal architecture of the brain. There is no possibility of ever explaining the felt perception of consciousness itself.

Except, as Thompson, Varela, and Rosch point out, this actually leaves us with a major philosophical problem; cognitivists have a hard time actually justifying why consciousness exists at all. The cognitivist view actually means that “cognition can proceed without consciousness, for there is no essential or necessary connection between them,” (Varela 51). In one sense, a purely reductionist explanation of consciousness might be entirely adequate, but in a deeper sense, it actually doesn’t explain consciousness at all. It provides no insight into “what-it-is-like-to-be” a living being. This renders “philosophical conclusion itself… an epiphenomenon,” (Varela 57).

Even the archetypal cognitivist who perfectly accepts that lived-experience is an accidental by-product of cognition must acknowledge that all theorizing takes place within a “life-world,” in a Heideggerian sense. If cognitivist theories are unable to explain the life-world, then it is the life-world that will remain, not the theory, because the theory is dependent and emergent out of the life-world. The authors highlight the absurdity of this, noting that “in our present world science is so dominant that we give it authority to explain even when it denies what is most immediate and direct - our everyday, immediate experience,” (Varela 12). It’s inevitable that “when we relax into immediate bodily well-being of a sunny day or
bodily tension of anxiously running to catch a bus, [theoretical accounts] fade into the background as abstract and secondary. When it is cognition or mind that is being examined, the dismissal of experience becomes untenable, even paradoxical,” (Varela 12). Dismissing our actual experience in the study of cognition is, in fact, not studying cognition; “to deny the truth of our own experience in the scientific study of ourselves is not only unsatisfactory; it is to render the scientific study of ourselves without subject matter,” (Varela 13).

This leads to the final critique, the problem of circularity. It is outlined by the authors in the following passage:

any scientific description, either of biological or mental phenomena, must itself be the product of the structure of our cognitive system… furthermore, the act of reflection that tells us this does not come from nowhere; we find ourselves performing that act of reflection out of a given background (in a Heideggerian sense) of biological, social, and cultural beliefs and practices. But then yet again, our very postulation of such a background is something that we are doing: we are here, living embodied beings, sitting and thinking of this entire scheme, including what we call a background. So, in all rigor, we should caption our entire endeavor with yet another layer indicating this embodiment here and now... plainly, this kind of layering could go on indefinitely, as in an Escher drawing. (Varela 10-11)

The authors note that any theory of cognition we might generate is itself the product of cognition, and the manner in which we theorize is contingent on an immensely complex background of the life-world. This creates a recursive situation, whereby the sub-personal mind must reflect ever increasing layers of abstraction within the personal, ad infinitum. The authors conclude from this that the only way forward, is “rather than adding layers of continued abstraction, we should go back to where we
started, to the concreteness and particularity of our own experience -- even in the endeavor of reflection,” (Varela 11). From the problem of circularity, the authors highlight the necessity of returning to the simplest possible situation of study, that of our own experience. This is the groundwork of their argument for embodied practice.

The Embodied Mind & Buddhist Practice

What cognitivism is correct about, according to the authors, is challenging the felt sense of being a coherent “self.” They note the similarities between the findings of cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy. The authors promote the idea that “Buddhist doctrines of no-self and non-dualism… have a significant contribution to make in dialogue with cognitive science,” (Varela 22). Firstly, “the no-self doctrine contributes to understanding the fragmentation of self portrayed in cognitivism and connectionism,” (Varela 22). Buddhist philosophy describes our consciousness as being composed of five “aggregates,” also translated as “heaps”: form, sensation, perception, discrimination, and consciousness. Every moment of experience is composed of some manifestation of all of these faculties, and yet they have no essential reality or connections to one another. The belief that we are a collective, unified “self” is actually just a thought formation, a product of our discriminating mind making incorrect judgements about our experience.

Western intellectuals have long been trying to reconcile the experience of selfhood. Prominent philosophers like Marvin Minsky and Ray Jackendoff hold a perspective that “although there is no room for a truly existing self in cognitive
science, we cannot give up our conviction of the self,” (Varela 107). This leaves a fundamental split between the lived experience and science, which contemporary academics views as an unsurpassable hurdle. It appears inevitable that “science becomes remote from human experience”, and “generates a divided stance in which we are led to affirm consequences we appear to be constitutionally incapable of accepting,” (Varela 127).

Whereas the challenge to “selfhood” that occurs in contemporary cognitive science is conceptual and dissociates us from our everyday experience of feeling like a self, Buddhist notions of selflessness are arrived at through an embodied practice that “never became divorced from living pragmatics,” (Varela 22). Seeing “emptiness” or the “no-self” internally does not result in the same emotional disconnect as grappling with these ideas from a purely intellectual, disembodied perspective. Whereas in Western society the most “true” kinds of knowledge have become increasingly removed from lived experience, in Buddhist systems of thought, even such abstract notions as no-self are “intended to inform an individual as to how to handle [her/his] mind in personal and interpersonal situations,” (Varela 22). They are actually “embodied in the structure of communities,” and shape the way individuals live in the world, (Varela 22). Embodied practice could serve as a bridge that connects academic knowledge to embodied life, and therefore to communities of non-academics as well. Whereas cognitive scientists realize the truth of no-self conceptually, Buddhist practices of meditation are designed to bring practitioners to a different understanding of this idea, one which is felt in the body and intuitive. When
felt in this way, the experience is reported to be liberating and elating rather than jarring. The authors of *The Embodied Mind* see this potential for unification of the sciences and lived experience as a primary argument for why we should take Buddhist philosophy more seriously, and perhaps take up embodied practice. If it is possible that through systematic meditation practitioners can perceive truths about their minds from the inside, then it is essential that cognitive scientists study the mind from both a first-person and third-person perspective simultaneously. Much of the anxiety caused by this “Hard” problem is actually just disconnect between our emotional feeling about the world and our intellectual knowledge of it.

The enactivist view bears out the notion in much critical theory and continental philosophy that knowledge is a contingent phenomenon. Truth is not static; it’s a dynamic relationship between between impermanent phenomena and the embodied perceiver, which is likewise impermanent. This constantly shifting, ephemeral nature of the phenomenal world, including intellectual constructs, is the foundation of Buddhist thought. But rather than finding any source of stability, the authors of *The Embodied Mind* suggest we adopt the tools necessary to grow into groundlessness. Realizing this experientially is the closest thing to “truth” in a Buddhist sense, although whether we give it any ontological significance is arbitrary. Lama Geshe Tsering expresses this view in his book *Buddhist Psychology*. “Epistemology in Buddhism is not merely the study of knowledge for its own sake, but is aimed at bringing the seeker an understanding of how sentient beings can
enactivism emerged in part through research in artificial intelligence. researchers
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Enactivism

Let us begin to lay out the authors’ own perspective, the enactive approach.

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Knowledge is only meaningful inasmuch as it is functional.

The cognitivist view throws the human being, with ego intact, into the
uncertainty of the Buddhist realization of “emptiness” without the necessary tools to
cope and integrate the material into their embodied reality. Even scientists engaging
with this material live in a split reality between their bodily and academic lives. This
renders the realizations of cognitive science impossible to integrate or use in life.

After “having brilliantly formulated the discovery of selfless minds, a discovery of
fundamental relevance to the human situation,” we are left “conceiving of no way to
bring that discovery together with everyday experience,” and therefore “have no
recourse but to shrug and go off to any modern equivalent of backgammon,” (Varela
130).

overcome their problems and eventually experience liberation,” (Tsering 95).
organize massive amounts of information about the world very quickly, and they do so selectively. The kinds of information we take in are the kinds of information that have utility to us.

Researchers found that when designing robotic visual systems, it was far more complex to design an entire visual field than to merely make a robot that could navigate an obstacle course by detecting objects near it. This points to something critical - the fact that the robot had a “body” of sorts enabled it to function in reality and have some kind of perception. Perception itself is difficult to imagine and even harder to create artificially without some kind of function - intelligence and consciousness arise out of functionality and physical embodiment. Researchers found many of the tasks we find most simple were actually the most difficult for robots to learn - this is because “commonsense knowledge is difficult, perhaps impossible, to package into explicit, propositional knowledge,” (Varela 148). Common-sense learning, or “embodied” learning is “based on the accumulation of experience in a vast number of cases,” (Varela 148). Much of how humans navigate the world is through this subconscious, bodily training about how to walk and how to speak, and in determining what kinds of information are relevant to given tasks. It is actually “common sense,” or a kind of bodily knowledge of “who and how I am in the world” that defines and is a precondition for consciousness; “cognition cannot be properly understood without common sense.” Since this common sense is constituted by “bodily and social history” then “the inevitable conclusion is that knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or
dependent co-origination,” (Varela 150). Human beings, as well as all sentient beings, possess a massive body of non-propositional, embodied intelligence which both generates the world they walk through, and unconsciously gives them the ability to walk through it. It is integral to the creation of both the world and the actions we are capable of taking within it.

Philosopher Mark Johnson goes so far as to argue that complex, propositional logic is actually composed of abstracted metaphors given by embodied experience. “Humans, [Mark Johnson] argues, have very general cognitive structures called kinesthetic image schemas… These schemas originate in bodily experience, can be defined in terms of certain structural elements, have a basic logic, and can be metaphorically projected to give structure to a wide variety of cognitive domains,” (Johnson 177). These “image schemas emerge from basic forms of sensorimotor activities and interactions and so provide a preconceptual structure to our experience,” (Johnson 178). There’s a building of conceptual structures out of these “image schemas.”

Meaningful conceptual structures arise from two sources: (1) from the structured nature of bodily and social experiences and (2) from our innate capacity to imaginatively project from certain well-structured aspects of bodily and interactional experience to abstract conceptual structures. Rational thought is the application of very general cognitive processes - focusing, scanning, superimposition, figure-ground reversal, etc - to such structures. (Lakoff).

In this view, even higher-level cognition is build out of the non-conceptual architecture of the body. These image schemas are in a sense the “units” of complex thoughts. Even abstract domains such as physics and math rely on notions of space
and time that are arguably derived from our perception of embodied life. It is the body that shapes both the perceptual world we function in, and the manners of thinking that are available to us about that world. “The manner in which the perceiver is embodied - rather than some pre-given world determines how the perceiver can act and be modulated by environmental events,” (Varela 173).

This affects the way further research in cognitive science is to proceed; the focus is no longer on determining “how some perceiver-independent world is to be recovered,” but to “determine the common principles or lawful linkages between sensory and motor systems that explain how action can be perceptually guided in a perceiver dependent world,” (Varela 173). It is, in other words, to investigate the process by which the body shapes our perceptual experience. If reality is significantly constituted by these “linkages,” which take place in the body, then investigating first-person, phenomenological experience could actually give us insight into what reality “is,” at least to the extent that that is possible. The body is the “lowest-level,” or the “most true” point of access into reality.

This paradigm shift has huge implications for cognitive science. It inverts the classical hierarchy of intellect over body. It challenges the notion that abstract intelligence is the “highest faculty” of human beings. It is in fact the most simple. Concretely, it means that we must consider “context-dependent know-how not as a residual artifact that can be progressively eliminated by the discovery of more sophisticated rules, but as, in fact, the very essence of creative cognition,” (Varela 149). Cognition is defined by and shaped by the context of embodiment; recreating
embodiment and common-sense is actually the difficult part of creating human-like intelligence in AI. If we take this out of the domain of technology and consider what it means for philosophy and theory of knowledge in general, it means that a massive amount of the knowledge that human beings possess is bodily knowledge, which is contingent on social and environmental factors. “Knowledge is the result of an ongoing interpretation that emerges from our capacities of understanding. These capacities are rooted in the structures of our biological embodiment but are lived and experienced within a domain of consensual action and cultural history” (Varela 149). Knowledge relies on interpretation and interpretation takes place through the body, which is socially and culturally situated. It means that cognition is a process that, while the brain might be a critical nexus of organization and communication, is continuous with our body and even the world itself. There is no discrete cognizing subject, only a series of locations and structures that are cognized through. And it raises the possibility that investigating or changing our relationship with the body could have significance philosophically, inasmuch as it could bring us to a deeper understanding of how we unconsciously enact our world.

Formally, the authors define enactivism in the following terms. Firstly, enactivism holds that “cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context,” (Varela 173). Secondly, “sensory and motor processes, perception and action, are inseparable in lived cognition,” (Varela 173).
Meaning is given by the body. It “includes patterns of embodied experience and preconceptual structures of our sensibility (i.e., our mode of perception, or orienting ourselves, and of interacting with other objects, events, or persons),” (Johnson 175). We must note here the continuity of our meaning-making with the world itself - it does not end at the “edge” of our physical bodies. Our “embodied patterns do not remain private or peculiar to the person who experiences them,” rather, they are situated in “community [which] helps us interpret and codify many of our felt patterns,” (Johnson 175). We participate in a vast webs of “shared cultural modes of experience that help to determine the nature of our meaningful, coherent, understanding of the world,” (Johnson 175). The boundaries of individual cognition quite literally break down, as the architecture of our thought is shaped by our environment and co-constituted with other individuals. The body is permeable. When we recognize the body as integral to cognition, we recognize the permeability of cognition itself. The second portion of their definition can be restated as “perception consists in perpetually guided action” and that “cognitive structures emerge from recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided,” (Varela 173). The world we live in and what we can do in it are co-created phenomenon. How the body can function is the world it can function in.

We might come to think of the primary activity of the brain as changing itself and enacting a world, rather than representing the world. Then, “the world becomes inseparable from these processes of self-modification.” (Varela 139). The world is co-created by our experiencing of it. Instead of one world, “there are many different
worlds of experience - depending on the structure of the being involved and the kinds of distinctions it is able to make,” (Varela 9). The entire system can be thought of as having “operational closure,” meaning the purpose of brain processes is to create more brain processes. The brain does not function to represent the world, but to create the world and then act in that created world, self-modifying as it navigates. This, Varela describes as “enaction”; the brain enacts the world we live in.

They situate enactivism as an alternative to extremes of either realism, a belief in a “true” or objective “outside reality,” which our senses represent, or idealism, which holds the mind and phenomenological perception to be the only reality. To avoid the dangers of both, Varela hopes to propose a new non-representational philosophy of mind. He imagines a kind of “middle-way” which both solves the problems of representation, without taking on the problems of absolute idealism.

The enactive approach changes how we might think about cognition in the following ways. Firstly, it means that classical, scientific investigation of cognition must take the body seriously and expend resources attempting to discern how bodily intelligence operates. More significantly, it re-opens the possibility that first-person inquiry into experience through techniques of embodied practice might have philosophical significance. Embodied practice could firstly change the reality that is generated through bodily experience and secondly give practitioners insight into how their body generates this reality. Finally, the enactive approach paints a picture of a cognizer that is culturally and socially situated. It challenges the notion that our minds
end at the edge of our bodies (or brains), but rather, the very architecture of our thought is co-constituted by the social and cultural environments we exist in.
Chapter 2. Introducing Embodied Knowing

Thompson, Varela, and Rosch give a convincing argument for an enactive approach to cognition, as well as a compelling critique of cognitivism, but their effort to effectively bridge a Western perspective on cognitive science with traditions of embodied practice falls short. They do little to explain how their enactive paradigm relates to embodied practice, or to justify how embodied practice might change our relationship to the world. Specifically, they lack a detailed framework for what progress in meditation might look like, aside from becoming more “mindful,” and they fail to describe how the more “mindful” person might have any greater ability to do intellectual work. I hope to provide a bridge here, providing a framework that will make the kind of development that occurs through embodied practice visible. To effectively build up our notion of embodied knowing, however, we will first dive into the work of Bessel van der Kolk, to understand how trauma changes the way we relate to and occupy our bodies. This text lays a foundation, grounded in the empirical study of trauma, on which we might develop our understanding of the relationship between mind and body. Bessel Van Der Kolk is the founder and medical director of a Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, a professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine, and the director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network, (Van der Kolk, Forward).

The last fifty years have seen dramatic changes in how doctors and researchers think about trauma. Advances in therapeutic methods and medical imaging have given researchers the ability to map the the brains of people suffering
from PTSD and other forms of severe trauma; the results paint a new picture of the human body-mind. If correctly interpreted, I believe the understanding of trauma laid out by Bessel Van Der Kolk will offer a gateway to a potentially revolutionary view of the human being. The basic idea that Van der Kolk found in his work is that hardships we endure through our lives leave “traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems,” (Van der Kolk 1). The author states that:

Overwhelming experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality - the core of who we are… trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. (Van der Kolk 21).

To be traumatized is not a one time event; it changes the structure of the body-mind semi-permanently. It encodes the way we move through the world, changes the way we occupy our bodies, and alters way we think. It restructures our narratives about the world, as well as our perceptual experience of it. I will spend some time outlining what exactly this “imprint” is. The summary of Van Der Kolk’s work is that trauma (1) changes the way we make sense of the world (2) affects our relationship to our bodies (3) affects our social coherence and relationships with others (ie. trauma is not an isolated phenomenon, but a group phenomenon) and (4) the effects of trauma are often unconscious to the person that carries it. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster,” (APA). Not all traumatic experiences are the same.
Similar kinds of traumatic experiences do not effect people’s bodies similarly. There is notable variation in people’s resilience to, and ability to heal from, overwhelming negative experiences. *The Body Keeps the Score* is partially an effort to unpack what exactly makes a traumatic event “stick” and continue to affect people for long after the experience has past. Van der Kolk realizes through his work that certain overwhelming experiences leave more residual effects the body-mind. They become “stuck” in body and psyche. Rather than being processed, made sense of, healed from, and integrated, the experience becomes “encoded” in the way we see and react to the world. The two primary variables he identifies in determining how traumatic an experience becomes are 1) immobilization and 2) social support. Van der Kolk notes that “immobilization is at the root of most traumas,” (Van der Kolk 86). Physical and emotional immobilization, the inability to move the body or articulate one’s pain, increase the degree to which an overwhelming experience becomes encoded in the body as trauma. This is a critical notion, and we will return to it. As we unpack the kinds of bodily and psychological changes that occur in traumatized individuals, we will also formulate arrive at a new conception of what preventing and healing trauma might look like.

(1) Altered Perception

Among the changes that happen to the body-mind of a traumatized individual are a sometimes dramatic change in perception. Trauma alters our felt sense of who we are and how the world is. It causes a “fundamental reorganization of the way the
mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but our very capacity to think,” (Van der Kolk 17). Certain aspects of the world which were previously interpreted in one way are interpreted in another.

Things that previously were not terrifying, or did not evoke anger, suddenly do.

Trauma alters the way people sort and make sense of incoming information. It causes “alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant,” (Van der Kolk 3). Traumatized people are less creative, they “have trouble learning from experience,” and they tend to “superimpose their trauma on everything around them and have trouble deciphering whatever is going on around them,” (Van der Kolk 17).

It’s as though the world is seen through a “lens” of the experience they endured.

Imagination and verbal cognition, their actual conscious experience of the world, functions within terms set by trauma. It shapes the emotional and linguistic “boundaries” of the world traumatized people walk through. As we will see later, the process by which this happens, the fact that it does, and is almost never visible to the person themself.

The way trauma shapes perception is deeply linguistic; trauma shapes the bounds of the articulable. Van Der Kolk found that when a traumatized person experiences a flashback, his “subjects’ brains lit up only on the right side,” (Van der Kolk 44). He notes that

Deactivation of the left hemisphere has a direct impact on the capacity to organize experiences into logical sequences and to translate our shifting feelings and perceptions into words… in technical terms they are experiencing loss of executive functioning, (Van der Kolk 45).
The entire organism can becomes hijacked by an old fear, a feeling or terror or anger or some kind of arousal that impairs speech, communication, and rational thinking. During an event like this, the “right brain reacts as if the traumatic event were happening in the present. But their left brain is not working very well, they may not be aware that they are reexperiencing or reenacting the past - they are just furious, terrified, enraged, ashamed, or frozen,” (Van der Kolk 45). It is notable that “they may not be aware” of this process as it happens. A common occurrence with flashbacks or “triggering” events is that “after the emotional storm passes, they may look for something or someone to blame for it,” (Van der Kolk 45). Because the actual cause of a surge of fear is unconscious, a person is unable to discern why they were upset, so people often blame people or events around them for causing the upset.

During a flashback, there is “a “significant decrease” in activity a part of the brain that is critical for speech, or “broca’s area,” (Van der Kolk 43). This explains why traumatized people have a hard time articulating their experiences around the traumatic event. “Even years later, traumatized people often have enormous difficulty telling other people what happened to them. Their bodies re-experience terror, rage, and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate,” (Van der Kolk 43). Traumatized individuals find it “enormously difficult to organize [their] traumatic experiences into a coherent account - a narrative with beginning, a middle, and an end,” (Van der Kolk 43). They frequently “come up with what many of them call their “cover story” that offers some explanation for their symptoms and behavior for public consumption,” (Van der Kolk
43). They are not fully able to articulate their inner emotional life; “these stories, however, rarely capture the inner truth of the experience,” (Van der Kolk 43). All of this begins to show us the degree of disconnect possible between the emotional and rational mind. Certain memories of painful experience become “blocked off” in traumatized people, inaccessible to the linguistic mind and conscious experience. These “blocked off” portions of us continue to affect them; they determine, for potentially the rest of a person’s life, the bounds of the articulable and perception of the present. It sets the parameters within which a person may think and express their subjectivity. There are, for a person who is traumatized, parts of themselves that are simply off limits. “Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or imaginable past,” (Van der Kolk 43).

This shows that there do in fact exist emotional and rational parts of the brain which function in dialogue, but not necessarily coherently. For some, this is more like an argument, or a battle. There is a broad range of degrees and kinds of trauma, and indicating perhaps a broad range and degrees of integration or coherence between the emotional body’s “image” of how the world is and the mind’s perception. Van der Kolk states that “all trauma is preverbal,” (Van der Kolk 43). Humans are deeply effected by this “preverbal” imprint which affects our lives without being intelligible by or accessible to conscious experience. The reality is that, “no matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality,” (Van der Kolk 47). The traumatized are
disconnected from their own emotional realities, and this shows up in predictable ways.

(2) Trauma and Social Attunement

Trauma challenges notions of individual separateness. It is a social phenomenon, both in how it affects the individual, and how it moves through society. The strength of our interpersonal relationships and communities are immensely important for long-term health, (Van der Kolk 59). This kind of social well-being has biological correlates. Human beings constantly engage in an incredibly complex and sophisticated process of non-verbal, bodily communication. Through mirror neurons and the vagus nerve, “we pick up not only another person's movement but her emotional state and intentions as well,” (Van der Kolk 59). People who are “in sync” with one another “tend to stand or sit in similar ways, and their voices take on the same rhythms. This ability to be “in-sync” with people around them varies by individual. Our social congruence and sense of feeling valued in community depends on the balance between our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, which are controlled by the vagus nerve. “The more efficiently the [vagus nerve] synchronizes the activity of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the better the physiology of each individual will be attuned to that of other members of the tribe,” (Van der Kolk 85).

Trauma can be caused by lack of mirroring. Being dehumanized or not being “seen” in a painful situation a highly traumatizing kind of experience. “Trauma
almost invariably involves not being seen, not being mirrored, and not being taken into account,” (Van der Kolk 59). The degree to which we are sensitive to non-verbal communication means we are also sensitive to others’ negativity; we often intuitively feel the anger, fury, or depression of others, (Van der Kolk 59). Even from infancy, whether or not and how we are mirrored by our parents and peers shapes our sense of safety and security in the world. It’s common that “from recurring experiences of misattunement, [a] child acquires the unconscious conviction that unmet developmental yearnings and reactive painful feeling states are manifestations of a loathsome defect or of an inherent badness,” (Epstein 12 ). Simply not being held can cause lifelong trauma. In the infant who has not been held well enough, “some degree of primitive agony has to be carried on into life and living,” (Epstein 12). The limbic system is shaped in response to these early experiences. A person takes into the world a sense of safety or fear depending on these early experiences of socialization, mirroring, and physical contact. “In partnership with the infant’s own genetic makeup and inborn temperament… whatever happens to a baby contributes to the emotional and perceptual map of the world that its developing brain create, (Van der Kolk 55).

Not only can poor attunement cause trauma, but it causes the traumatized person to then lose this ability as well. Trauma disrupts a person’s ability to mirror and be mirrored by others. People living in traumatized bodies become incongruent and uncommunicative with the world around them, (Van der Kolk 80). Van Der Kolk found that “many traumatized people find themselves chronically out of sync with the people around them,” (Van der Kolk 81). This kind of out-of-syncness, or inability to
mirror others, can create further trauma and leave people alienated from the social spaces they occupy. Traumatized people frequently experience social isolation, or become maladjusted to the social environments they are in. This also reveals how trauma can be passed intergenerationally and interpersonally.

Trauma affects not only those who are directly exposed to it, but also those around them. Soldiers returning home from combat may frighten their families with their rages and emotional absence. The wives of men who suffer from PTSD tend to become depressed, and the children of depressed mothers are at risk of growing up insecure and anxious. Having been exposed to family violence as a child often makes it difficult to establish stable, trusting relationships as an adult. (Van der Kolk 1).

People traumatized by war may lose the ability to effectively mirror their partners and children. This emotional incongruence can then can pass the trauma of war on intergenerationally.

Van der Kolk found that the process of healing trauma must be a social process through which people learn to mirror others and spend time around others without feeling isolated, while also learning healthy boundaries.

“Treatment needs to reactivate the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored, by others, but also to resist being hijacked by others’ negative emotions,” (Van der Kolk 59). Being supported in community is essential. “Numerous studies of disaster response around the globe have shown that social support is the most effective protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma,” (Van der Kolk 81). And yet, this is not as simple as being around people. It requires being around people who are emotionally attentive and can
“see us,” can mirror us, and can make it clear that this is a safe space to relax. It requires “reciprocity: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else’s mind and heart,” (Van der Kolk 81). Indeed, “chronic emotional abuse and neglect can be just as devastating as physical abuse and sexual molestation,” (Van der Kolk 90). This is important. “For our physiology to calm down, we need a visceral feeling of safety,” (Van der Kolk 81).

This has implications for how we should structure our society, as well as for how we think about who and what we are. “Our culture teaches us to focus on personal uniqueness, but at a deeper level we barely exist as individual organisms,” (Van der Kolk 80). Our nervous systems are in sync with one another, speaking to each other in a bodily language of safety and fear, trauma and openness. There is a wide variety of “resonances,” or human beings that we can be “in-sync” with, or “out-of-sync” with, on a bodily level, and this is actually highly important for human happiness and well-being. We may come to see trauma as a social phenomenon that does not respect clean boundaries of individual bodies and minds. We are given trauma, suffer from it, and pass it on unconsciously. Just as pollution is not containable in specific portions of the environment, transgressing boundaries and efforts at compartmentalization, so too do patterns of emotional and bodily fear. If we begin to conceive of human bodies not as individuals but as positioned within a field through which communication takes place, through which messages are conveyed, we arrive at new possibilities for visualizing injustices as geographically and spatially
located patterns of trauma, and socially maladjusted or violent people are no longer conceived of as unknowable or unintelligible, but as highly concentrated nexuses in a field of trauma in which we are all located. We are not free from responsibility, no matter where we are located, because human beings are not individuals but entangled with one another, even at the level of our nervous systems. For most people, this process is entirely unconscious.

(3) Unconsciousness

The way trauma effects lived experience, altering our perception, experience of our bodies, and ability to attune to others is incredibly difficult to perceive in the first-person. “There have in fact been hundreds of scientific publications spanning well over a century documenting how memory of trauma can be repressed, only to resurface years or decades later,” (Van der Kolk 192). People rarely see their behavior as a result of past traumatic experiences, and oftentimes they do not even register those past experiences as having been traumatic. Traumatized people “are rarely in touch with the fact that these sensations have their origins in traumatic experience,” (Van der Kolk 67). They often feeling bad and do not know why, creating shame around their emotional incongruence with people around them. Since traumatized people frequently do not understand why they feel the way they feel, “shame becomes the dominant emotion and hiding the truth becomes the central preoccupation” of their lives (Van der Kolk 67). Traumatized people “who suffer from
flashbacks often organize their lives around trying to protect against them.” (Van der Kolk, 67).

The unconsciousness of trauma and the shame it causes create common patterns of compulsive or addictive behaviors that mask underlying emotional pain. Traumatized people “may compulsively go to the gym to pump iron (but finding that they are never strong enough), numb themselves with drugs, or try to cultivate an illusory sense of control in highly dangerous situations (like motorcycle racing, bungee jumping, or working as an ambulance driver),” (Van der Kolk 67). Van der Kolk describes why this is so common; “for many traumatized people, re-exposure to stress might provide a similar relief from anxiety,” (Van der Kolk 17). Activities that effectively mask emotional pain often become integral to a traumatized personality and identity. Personality and identity reformulate around trauma and the coping mechanisms a person uses to escape it. Lives are spent managing emotional sensations that are overwhelming, and people identify deeply with these behaviors as constituting their sense of self. “After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system. The survivor’s energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their life,” (Van der Kolk 53). The unconsciousness of the trauma means that, for many people, its effects are “played out on the battlefield of their own bodies,” continually undermining mental well-being and relationships, “usually without a conscious connection between what happened back then and what is going on right now inside,” (Van der Kolk 68). Recognizing that trauma unconsciously constitutes identity and
shapes behavior allows us to reformulate our image of the addict or the social deviant. Such behaviors are “not the result of moral failings or the signs of lack of willpower or bad character - they are caused by actual changes in the brain,” (Van der Kolk 3).

(4) Trauma & the Body

Traumatic experiences change the way a person relates to their body. Van der Kolk found in his patients with a history of traumatic experience an almost universal “extreme disconnection from the body,” (Van der Kolk 91). The ability to detect and make sense of physical sensation is severely compromised in many traumatized people.

I was amazed to discover how many of my patients told me they could not feel whole areas of their bodies. Sometimes I’d ask them to close their eyes and tell me what I had put into their outstretched hands. Whether it was a car key, a quarter, or a can opener, they often could not even guess what they were holding - their sensory perceptions simply weren’t working, (Van der Kolk 91).

The system by which this occurs is a process of numbing. “In response to the trauma itself, and in coping with the dread that persisted long afterward, these patients had learned to shut down the brain areas that transmit the visceral feelings and emotions that accompany and define terror,” (Van der Kolk 94). The human body-mind is malleable in a way that few have anticipated; we can and do systematically numb ourselves to overwhelming sensations of pain or fear. The mind can alter and transfigure its relationship to the body in powerful ways, as a coping mechanism to unendurable situations. Unfortunately, this process of numbing also mutes a person’s
experience of positive sensations and emotions. The areas of the brain that are frequently down-regulated in traumatised people are also “responsible for registering the entire range of emotions and sensations that form the foundation of our self-awareness, our sense of who we are,” (Van der Kolk 100). Trauma “compromises the part of our brain that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive,” (Van der Kolk 3).

Antonio Damasio, another trauma researcher, describes how the mind contorts itself in dramatic ways to hide the reality of felt experience. Damasio explains: Sometimes we use our minds not to discover facts, but to hide them… One of the things the screen hides most effectively is the body, our own body, by which I mean the ins and outs of it, its interiors. Like a veil thrown over the skin to secure its modesty, the screen partially removes from the mind the inner states of the body, those that constitute the flow of life as it wanders in the journey of each day. (Damasio 28).

Accompanying numbness is often emotional dysregulation, where people lose the ability to interpret and express their feelings. “Many traumatized children and adults simply cannot describe what they are feeling because they cannot identify what their physical sensations mean,” (Van der Kolk 100). This phenomenon is frequently accompanied by an experience of dissociation or depersonalization, whereby a person may not feel like or recognize themselves. “The self can become detached from the body” in a phenomenon called “depersonalization” and “live a phantom existence of its own,” (Van der Kolk 102). This might manifest as a person feeling as though they are not their body, or they are a stranger in their own life. It can also manifest as an inability to recognize themselves in the mirror, (Van der Kolk 94). All of these
describe a variety of distortions of the perception of self and self-image that commonly occur in traumatized individuals.

What this reveals is that the human experience encompasses a wide variety of internal mental and emotional maps of self and experiences of the body. There is variation not just in beliefs about the world, but in the perceptual worlds people walk through. From Thompson, Varela, and Rosch, we can see that our bodies are integral for constructing reality itself. Van der Kolk shows us how this variation is not just between different species of animal, but different individual human beings. Different emotional and perceptual experiences of the world are available to different people, depending on how they were conditioned socially, culturally, and in their families.

Van Der Kolk, Enactivism, & Intersubjectivity

Thomas Nagel in his famous essay “What is it like to be a bat?” explains the difficulty with attempting to view consciousness in a reductionist way. He explains that “philosophers share the general human weakness for explanations of what is incomprehensible in terms suited for what is familiar and well understood, though entirely different,” (Nagel, 1). This is made evident when he asks the reader to consider what it is like to be a bat. He notes that “if extrapolation from our own case is involved in the idea of what it is like to be a bat, the extrapolation must be incomplettable. We cannot form more than a schematic conception of what it is like. For example, we may ascribe general types of experience on the basis of the animal's structure and behavior,” (Nagel, 3). Even if we developed an entirely precise
neurophysiology of bats, we would not have gained any insight into the subjective experience of being a bat. It is true that “Any reductionist program has to be based on an analysis of what is to be reduced,” (Nagel, 2). Therefore, if “the analysis leaves something out, the problem will be falsely posed,” (Nagel, 2).

This kind of problem, that the conscious reality of other beings is unknowable, is made even more profound by Van der Kolk’s work. The conscious reality of different other human beings, not just bats, is unknowable. The fact that many human beings can communicate with language provides a sense that we are in fact sharing a similar conscious experience of the world, but the kind of social, cultural, and embodied maps of reality that we occupy might be very different. This leaves us with deep humility in the face of the other, a recognition of intersubjectivity, and a recognition that we do not know what we do not know. We cannot know the extent to which another person perceives certain emotional ranges or aesthetic nuances that we cannot. We cannot know which anxieties do not plague a person if we do not even recognize them in ourselves. This is an anti-colonial attitude. If the colonial mindset is about universalizing one’s own values and therefore consciousness onto others, Van der Kolk shows us that this is simply not how the human body-mind works. People from other cultures, metaphysical worldviews, historical vantage points, or kinds of bodies walk in quite literally different worlds, often different in ways that we cannot imagine. They are inaccessible perceptual spaces to us.

A Continuum of Embodiment
It would be dangerous to believe that people with PTSD, or those who’ve experienced severe forms of violence or abuse, are somehow qualitatively different than the rest of us. Studies of people suffering from PTSD offer a window into the way trauma works in all of us, expressing patterns we all share on a different scale. Gabor Mate, a physician and trauma expert, explains that “normalcy is a myth. The idea that some people have pathology and the rest of us are normal is crude. There’s nothing about any mentally ill person—and it doesn’t matter what their diagnosis is—that I couldn’t recognize in myself.” Mate’s particular radical but telling view is that “in every case, mental illness is an outcome of traumatic events,” (Nerenberg). Mark Epstein, psychiatrist and author of *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, writes that trauma “is simply a fact of life,” (Epstein 3). Not only is “the possibility of emotional trauma built into the basic constitution of human existence,” but it’s incredibly common (Epstein 11). “Trauma happens to everyone. The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence… Some… are explicit; others… are more subtle,” (Epstein 11). The underlying cognitive and perceptual system active in people with PTSD is the human system. We all share it. The universal rule is malleability; human beings have widely varying emotional and bodily maps of the world that operate without their full conscious awareness. These maps significantly affect our decision-making and how we navigate space and ideas. They shapes our perception of who we are and who others are. The way this map is structured mirrors our relationship with and the degree to which we occupy our body. The more we are fully aware and unafraid of the intensity of emotional and physical sensations in our body,
the more emotionally attuned we are to our environment, including other human beings, the less reactive or “triggerable” we are, the more coherent our narrative of self, the better able we are to express our experience to others, the less mental and emotional energy we expend trying to avoid being triggered, the less harm we end up committing against others to avoid being “triggered.” A person who is fully unafraid of the physical sensations they experience disrupts the tendrils of trauma that flow through society, breaking the cycle of traumatizing and re-traumatizing other human beings. And their sense of subjective embodiment is altered compared to the majority of human beings alive.

**Treating Trauma: Re-occupying the Body**

The picture of trauma outlined in *The Body Keeps the Score* brings into focus an entirely new conception of healing from trauma. Fundamental to healing is a process of re-embodiment. It is one of re-encountering, familiarization with, and growing comfort amidst, a storm of terrifying or painful bodily sensations and emotions. “Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies,” (Van der Kolk 102). The development of “physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past,” (Van der Kolk 102). In his own work, Van der Kolk has looked at a variety of embodied modalities for helping patients become friendly with their bodies.

This is not always a smooth ride. The process of re-encountering bodily sensation can be very intense. “Noticing sensations for the first time can be quite
distressing, and it may precipitate flashbacks in which people curl up or assume defense postures,” (Van der Kolk 103). When a patient begins to tap into the reserves of bodily trauma through encountering bodily sensation, “images and physical sensations may deluge patients at this point, and the therapist must be familiar with ways to stem torrents of sensations and emotions to prevent them from becoming retraumatized by accessing the past,” (Van der Kolk 203). Van der Kolk describes these as “somatic reenactments of the undigested trauma,” (Van der Kolk 103). I believe this terminology is important. “Undigested” offers a critical metaphor here. It suggests there is a necessary process of “digesting” our experiences, including overwhelming ones, that can become “stuck” or “uncompleted.” Remnants of experience that are not properly metabolized literally lodge inside the body and must be properly processed to be integrated into conscious awareness.

Patients, and therapists, must cultivate a set of skills by which they can cope with or integrate these sensations. Van der Kolk notes that this is, in fact, trainable. “We can directly train our arousal system by the way we breathe, chant, and move, a principle that has been utilized since time immemorial in places like China, India, and in every religious practice that I know of, but that as been suspiciously eyed as “alternative” in mainstream culture,” (Van der Kolk 209). This provides us with a framework to interpret what embodied practices actually do. In part, at least, they allow the cultivation of a set of skills to help with the “metabolism” of undigested experience. Through re-encountering body and becoming familiar with a broader range of sensation, we may fully metabolize stuck portions of our experience. This
may allow a significant undoing of “structuring” of experience by trauma and past conditioning.

Van der Kolk did in fact find that embodied practice was an effective for traumatized individuals. He found that “yoga turned out ot be a terrific way to (re)gain a relationship with the interior world and with it a caring, loving, sensual relationship to the self,” (Van der Kolk 275). Evidence supports the effectiveness of embodied practices in improving emotional and physical regulation. “Ten weeks of yoga practice markedly reduced the PTSD symptoms of patients who had failed to respond to any medication or any other treatment,” (Van der Kolk, “Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for PTSD,” 559-65).

The basic processes occurring here in both yoga and meditation are the same. They involve an re-acquaintance with and breathing through difficult physical sensations. “Learning how to breathe calmly and remaining in a state of relative physical relaxation, even while accessing painful and horrifying memories, is an essential tool for recovery,” (Van der Kolk 209). The act of “simply noticing what you feel fosters emotional regulation,” (Van der Kolk 275). The core of this is that “actions that involve noticing and befriending sensations in our bodies can produce profound changes in both mind and brain that can lead to healing from trauma,” (Van der Kolk 277).

Notably, Bessel van der Kolk is not the only Western academic to have come up with the notion that embodied modalities are integral to treating trauma. Alexander Lowen and Wilhelm Reich, two mostly forgotten students of Freud, created a theory
called “bioenergetics,” which consisted of breathing exercises and stretches. Lowen wrote that “chronic muscular tension in different parts of the body constitutes the prison that prevents the free expression of an individual’s spirit… They manifest the inhibition of impulses which the person dare not express for fear of punishment… Deadening the body eliminates the pain and fear because the dangerous impulses are effectively “imprisoned.” Survival thus seems assured, but the repression becomes a mode of life for the individual,” (Van der Kolk 7). Lowen posits that most people walk around in a body essentially hardened by fear which we internalized from our interactions with our parents and surroundings as we grew up. He developed a system of embodied therapies throughout his life to free patients from bodily trauma, which manifested in ways of moving and breathing. Lowen found in his own life, and work with patients, that bodily modalities could in fact provide a degree of freedom from this kind of “hardening” of body.

Despite Van der Kolk’s research, the dominant modalities for treating mental health issues are still talk therapy and medication. He notes the disconnect between what people are actually doing to address their trauma, and the kinds of therapeutic modalities that are most commonly offered. In interviews with 225 people who escaped from the Twin Towers on 9/11, survivors reported that “acupuncture, massage, yoga, and EMDR,” were most effective in helping them overcome the effects of their experience,” (Van der Kolk 233). He notes the “the disparity between survivors’ experience and experts’ recommendations is intriguing,” (Van der Kolk 233). This research suggest a new paradigm for trauma would include a vast array of
bodily therapies, pro-social therapies, and community-building interventions. If “the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking, gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation this demands a radical shift in therapeutic assumptions, (Van der Kolk 88). The body offers the road to well-being.

The Dhamma Brothers

Letter from The Dhamma Brothers gives us numerous powerful accounts of people re-encountering body sensation in a way that mirrors the “flashbacks” described by van der Kolk, but in the context of deliberate meditation practice, these experiences are frequently described as both incredibly painful and incredibly liberating. Letters from the Dhamma Brothers includes a compilation of letters, written from inmates in an Alabama prison, about their experience with a 10-day intensive vipassana meditation course. The course required participants to wake up at 4:00 am and meditate around 10 hours per day for 10 days. I focus on the prisoners’ descriptions of discovering new areas of the body or blocked off portions of their emotional reality, which demonstrates the possibility and efficacy of vipassana as a tradition of “reinhabiting” the body or rediscovering lost aspects of one’s emotional (bodily) life.

Leon Kennedy explained that, “by the fifth day, I wanted to break my vow of silence to go and grab my friend OB and tell him, “Hey, I am liberated.” I wanted to while we were in the hall because the feeling was so overwhelming. I knew what love
was, and I cried and cried.” (Phillips, 76). This rediscovering of deeper or forgotten portions of a person’s experience is, at least for many practitioners, integral to the experience of liberation in contemplative practice. Torrence Barton wrote about his experience that by “the seventh day I was really getting the feeling of working with my sensations and my emotions, and I’m feeling things. And it’s just, it was amazing. At the last minute, all that I had been suppressing and trying to dodge start coming up. And I started dealing with a lot of emotions to the point where I had to take a break from it…. It was like, just beautiful,” (Phillips, 171). There’s a similar experience of a “bubbling up” or “emerging” of old material, repressed, lost emotions. Vipassana as a meditation practice is structured around the direct investigation of bodily sensation. People spend significant time investigating their bodily sensations, and they experience liberating emotional releases or clarity. One of the most powerful and detailed of this descriptions is the account given by Johnny Mack of his re-encountering emotions related to a traumatic event.

My mother died in 1968, a couple of months before my release. I was allowed to go to the funeral, hands cuffed behind my back and legs shackled, with two white prison guards… There I stood in front of the casket, looking at my mother’s unsmiling face in an all Black church with two white guards standing behind me. I didn’t know it at the time, but it was anger that allowed me to show no emotions, only bitterness. As the years passed, I buried the emotional grief of my mother passing so deep and so quick that I’ve never felt anything. I kept piling stuff on top of my grief until death became my friend and I completely lost all to death - It was just something that happened. I’d locked myself in a prison worse than any other. Anyway, I’m finally able to grieve my mother’s death and not be ashamed… I’m now equipped to deal with my “stuff,” (Phillips, 168.)
Mack’s account repeats several of the previous patterns with even more clarity; he relates every single aspect of a traumatic experience described by Van der Kolk. Firstly, he is literally immobilized during the entire experience, forced to wear handcuffs. He is emotionally immobilized by his own anger and the humiliation of being brought to his mother’s funeral in handcuffs by white guards. He is dehumanized and not “attuned to” by the guards. And, as a result, he describes “burying” his grief “so deep and so quick that [he] never felt anything.” This mirrors Van der Kolk’s description of emotional numbing and the unconscious quality of traumatic events. Finally, he explains that “he’d locked himself in a prison worse than any other,” that being the prison of a traumatized mind and body. Re-entering the body through vipassana “equipped” Mack to “deal with his stuff.” It gave him the tools to begin re-occupying the body.

This view of meditation as a re-occupying of the body is certainly not foreign to these traditions themselves. Reggie Ray, an American Buddhist teacher and academic, describes how through the practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism, a person is “gradually introduced to a very different experience of the body… instead of knowing the body in a conventional way and in terms of conventional experiences you begin to know the body through a series of practices that enter you into it,” (Ray). For him, the practice of Buddhism is a practice of encountering the totality of feelings of being alive. “In the Vajrayana tradition, the entire emphasis is on the entering into the soma, entering into the body, and not only conducting path, but conducting our life from that standpoint,” (Ray). It’s a recognition that “the body is a very vast, and very
profound resource,” and that few people in modern society have a very deep experience of it (Ray). Indeed, “when we are cut off from our bodies, as we largely are, in modern culture, many people report that they feel completely out of touch with their human life. And this is not a vague paranoid thinking, it’s actually a statement of fact,” (Ray). Most people exist in a highly conceptual or fragmented space, a disembodied space, which allows “less experience in the way of direct visceral feeling of being alive” and less awareness of the “sensory realm and emotional life and somatic intuitions and what the body is telling us,” (Ray). As a result “we feel arid and dry and dead,” (Ray). This picture, that embodied practice is about entering into the body, and potentially in a way that is beyond or deeper than “normal perception,” is validated by many Buddhist teachers themselves. Ray refers to “the totality of our knowingness of the body” as the “soma,” and conceives of the purpose of Buddhist practice as fully occupying or inhabiting the experience of the soma, (Ray).

We must take a view of embodied practice which understands the re-occupation of the body as central. What this means is that two people with different traumatic histories, or histories of embodied practice, might speak in similar terms, but have wildly different phenomenological experiences of their body and internal world. There is quite literally a process of opening up new “vistas” or viewpoints from which we have access to the world, that takes place through intensive meditation practice. People at different stages of embodied practice vary not just in terms of external, third-person measures of biological indicators, but in their
actual subjective experience of self-in-world. And this kind of opening, altering, and freeing of the internal experience is precisely what makes meditation philosophically complex. It’s what makes it difficult to articulate.

We might look to how the Van der Kolk, Johnny Mack, and Reggie Ray each describe this process. Van der Kolk describes the state of being traumatized as a “war [that is] largely played out in the theater of visceral experience - your gut, your heart, your lungs - and will lead to both physical discomfort and psychological misery,” (65). Johnny Mack describes his state prior to vipassana as having “lost all to death,” having “locked myself in a prison worse than any other,” (Phillips, 68). Ray describes this cut-off state as feeling “arid and dry and dead,” (Ray). Without knowing each other, the three men use some of the worst human experiences, war and death, to metaphorically relate the experience of being shut off from the body. Meditation cannot just be described in terms of the cultivation of third-person biomarkers for well-being, because, for practitioners, the experience takes place in terms of release from unconscious pain, which reforms the entire subject. This kind of release, is, understandably, an exceptionally powerful experience. The kinds of transformations that psychological trauma and stress can create in the mind body relation are powerful - the reverse of these transformations would then be equally powerful. We see this in Leon Kennedy’s description, that he “knew what love was, and I cried and cried,” (Phillips, 76). There is both a re-encountering of a new kind of emotion and a massive release.
These processes cannot be forced. Embodied practices can be too intense depending on the kind of trauma a person has experienced. In one instance, when Van Der Kolk piloted a yoga program for patients who had experienced serious trauma, he found that “any posture that involved the pelvis could precipitate intense panic or flashbacks to sexual assaults. Intense physical sensations unleashed the demons from the past that had been so carefully kept in check by numbing and inattention,” (Van der Kolk 276). A later, more successful program was much more gentle and gradual. Embodied practice might be thought of as a gradual training in a person’s ability to re-experience, metabolize, and integrate past experiences. It gives them the “tools,” as Johnny Mack explained. When successful, this allows literal opening up of a new world or vista of conscious experience. Experiences such as Kennedy’s or Mack’s are rendered unintelligible if meditation is made a purely third-person object because the experience of liberating the body is unimaginable before it has happened. It is an opening of a new phenomenological domain, an opening to consciousness of what was previous unconscious. This does not seem to happen through debate, reading, writing, or discourse. What embodied practice is designed to engender is this kind of change of subject position and opening of the body. Embodied knowing leaves us with a humility before what we do not know of others’ experience or even our own.

What does “Liberation” Mean?

If we can demonstrate that “embodiment,” or one’s degree of comfort in deeper layers of bodily sensation and experience, is in fact trainable, this might affect
our idea of what human happiness and well-being actually means. What is an actually “untraumatized” person? As we move in to considering Dharmic and contemplative traditions, we might start by imagining what a human being would look and act like who was the exact opposite of a person with PTSD, who had learned how to free the body of not just specific, major trauma, but all kinds of bodily conditioning. We can begin by revisiting Van der Kolk’s four primary effects of trauma.

1. **Trauma colors our narrative of friend, enemy, self and world, altering our physical perception of the reality we move through. It is integral to constituting identity.**

2. **It is a social phenomenon. Trauma can be caused by and cause inability to mirror or attune to others. Dehumanization and not being seen are central to trauma.**

3. **Trauma disconnects us from our body, rendering entire areas of our sensory and emotional worlds inaccessible to consciousness.**

4. **Trauma often leaves people with a feeling of “not being themselves,” otherwise known as dissociation or depersonalization. Trauma is almost always unconscious.**

If we imagined the inverse of these four effects, even to a greater than “baseline” level, we might imagine a person would
1. Have a clear identity and narrative about the world. A person would no longer misinterpret friendly people or situations as dangerous and dangerous people or situations as friends.

2. They would have a remarkable degree of emotional attentiveness and calibration to people around them.

3. They would have very subtle body awareness, which would open domains of phenomenological experience that others do not have access to.

4. They would experience a high degree of “consciousness” and feeling like themselves (the inverse of unconsciousness and depersonalization.)

They would no longer have any part of themselves “stuck in the past.” They would be entirely in the present. The past would cease to condition how they viewed the present and therefore the future. Every experience would be seen “like new.” This is essentially the reports given of the experience of long-time meditators. Without attempting to understand or make any claims about the spiritual or metaphysical significance of experiences brought about by embodied practice, we might instead design research programs about whether this spectrum of embodied knowing does in fact exist. If so, it would bring an entire category of unexplained experience far more intelligibility. From there, debating the ontological and metaphysical status of contemplative experience could proceed within a far more effective framework.

It is notable that the intensity and kind of meditation practice required for this kind of “re-embodiment” has not been studied in scientific settings. Partially, I would
posit, this is because, re-encountering the body can be incredibly intense. Just as Van der Kolk describes the “flashbacks” that can be brought up by re-encountering repressed body sensations, serious practitioners of meditation describe all manners of intense physical and psychological experiences that take place in serious practice environments. A longitudinal study arranged around intensive meditation practice would require a classically trained meditation teacher and multiple years of careful observation. Tibetan Buddhist teacher and scholar of religion Alan Wallace has proposed precisely this. He imagines a

Concerted, collaborative effort on the part of professional cognitive scientists and professional contemplatives, using their combined extraspective and introspective skills to tackle the hard problem of consciousness. This might involve, among other things, conducting longitudinal studies of the gradual development of śamatha [concentration] by people devoting themselves to this training with the same dedication displayed by the scientists employed in the Genome project. (Wallace, “Samatha” 148).

Wallace believes a study of this sort may change the face of Western science, with the “problem of consciousness” turning out “to have a role in the history of science comparable to that of the ultraviolet catastrophe,” (Wallace, “Samatha” 148). In the late 19th century, physicists thought physics to be essentially solved, except for the small problem of the ultraviolet catastrophe. Solving this reshaped the entire field with the advent of quantum theory. The problem of consciousness may turn out to be similar; solving it will require us giving up deeply held notions about the world and opening to a very different image of self-in-world.

Revisiting Thompson, Varela, & Rosch
From here we are in a position to both critique and elaborate on Thompson, Varela, and Rosch. The authors argue that embodied practice is important for cognitive science and advocate that academics engage in direct investigation of experience, but their argument does not leave us with a clear conception what spending time paying attention to embodied experience actually does. A critic of *The Embodied Mind* might argue that there’s no reason to believe that meditation or embodied practice would provide any epistemologically privileged point of access into reality. They give no strong argument as to why or how it would. There is no such thing, on an ontological level, as being “more” or “less” embodied. All human beings are equally embodied all the time, inasmuch as the body is equally constituting the reality of what it means to be conscious and living.

Their description of the practice and effects of meditation is roughly as follows; “mindfulness techniques are designed to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations, back from the abstract attitude, to the situation of one’s experience itself,” (Varela 22). What exactly “experience itself” here constitutes is ambiguous, which renders the position of “theories and preoccupations” equally ambiguous. Their description of the kind of progress or development that can occur through meditation practice is equally limited. They describe actualization of “mindfulness” as a quality of being more or less present. Normal non-meditative people are not mindful, and people who meditate a lot are mindful. This is essentially the system they outline. “One must first realize the extent to which people are normally not mindful,” (Varela 24). This “mindlessness” consists of a disunity
between body and mind, and a “disconnect from experience.” Practitioners realize that “body and mind are seldom closely coordinated,” (Varela 24). Or perhaps they experience a “piercing realization of just how disconnected humans normally are from their very experience,” (Varela 24). Daily life of a “mindless” person consists of a “a blur of abstract commentary as the mind hastens to its next mental occupation, (Varela 25). Mindfulness offers an opportunity to come out of an “abstract” mode of being and become more intimate with experience. It’s the development of a habit of presence in experience. “the dissociation of mind from body, of awareness from experience, is the result of habit, and these habits can be broken,” (Varela 26). This view of meditation offers no notion of progress, liberation, or the radical changes to subject position that are, for many, integral to the practice. This prevents a strong argument for the role of meditation in our lives. It doesn’t carry the argument, that scientists must meditate, to its conclusion. Their critique of status-quo philosophy is also rendered less effective as a result of their ambiguity in defining embodied practice.

They note how conventional philosophy utilizes primarily intellectual expositions and arguments. “Even philosophers who critique or problematize reason do so only by means of arguments, demonstrations, and -especially in our so-called postmodern era, linguistic exhibitions,” (Varela 20). The remedy they propose is embodied, open-ended reflection; “What we are suggesting is a change in the nature of reflection from an abstract, disembodied activity to an embodied, (mindful) , open-ended reflection. By embodied, we mean reflection in which body and mind
have been brought together,” (Varela 27). They give no explanation of how this would actually change the kind of philosophy that is done.

Essentially, the authors of the *The Embodied Mind* have no image of what actualization of “mindfulness” looks like in life. They lack, therefore, any notion of embodied knowing. Van der Kolk shows us that different human-beings experience the body in extremely different ways. Different portions of bodily experience are available or unavailable to the conscious mind depending factors like trauma, the community they live in, and their history of embodied practice. The kind of presence experienced by a meditation master is simply not comparable to the presence experienced by a beginning meditator, because stores of undigested experience still characterize the beginning meditator’s bodily experience. A person who has spent years practicing meditation has learned to unpack and let go of held structures of trauma in the body. They are present in the sense that Bessel van der Kolk describes in that they have largely released the “tyranny of the past,” making new areas of phenomenological and felt bodily experience permanently accessible to the conscious mind. Mindfulness is not a dichotomy and it is not as simple as a matter of “presence” in the colloquial sense.

Beyond this, Thompson, Varela, and Rosch, also neglect to mention that the process of studying and practicing meditation does not begin with an encounter with “non-self.” For the majority of people who embark on a serious meditation practice, there are years of integrating, making sense of, and becoming more at ease in the felt sense of self. There is a lot of trauma and past experiences to make sense of. This is
conveyed in a famous quotation from the historical Zen master, Eihei Dogen. He said that “to study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things,” (Dogen). Or, as Mark Epstein describes, “it was confusing to find that meditation - rather than dropping me into a void of no-self - backed me up into myself,” (Epstein 9). Meditation is not liberating through bypassing or escaping the suffering of the personal self, it is liberating through *encountering* the personal self, ie. the trauma of that self as it manifests in the body. The practice moves sequentially beginning with the absolutely worldly experience of trauma. By neglecting to describe this, the conception of meditation outlined by Thompson, Varela, and Rosch is actually a philosophical rather than pragmatic description, which runs contrary to their supposed goal of integrating cognitive science with lived experience.

Bessel van der Kolk gives us language to develop a notion of *embodied knowing*. This will allow us to continue to explore the vision of Francisco Varela with a more sophisticated framework for understanding what embodied practice actually does.
Chapter 3. Embodiment & Discipline

I first encountered the term *embodied knowing* in the work of Rajiv Malhotra, in a context I will touch on later. For now, let us consider that each person carries with them a body, which carries within a myriad of histories and trainings. It possesses trauma, familial upbringing, cultural background, and schooling. These experiences are etched into the body. How the body is inscribed with past experience continues to affect our lives in present time. It shapes our perception of what is or isn’t dangerous, who is a friend or enemy, and who, in fact, we are, in the narrative of our life. It gives us the world we live in. *Embodied Knowing* is the full image or map of the world that every human being holds in their emotional and physical bodies, composed of cultural, social, and familial conditioning and sculpted by experience. The same phenomenon might be interpreted differently by two people, but it is not necessarily their “reason” that is breaking down, but their emotional maps of the world that are incongruent. The strongest contours and faultlines of these maps are often traumatic events, but as Mark Epstein shows us, there are softer lines as well. The kind of conditioning children undergo in school, daily microaggressions experienced by marginalized populations, or subtle anger in the face of a mother can also cumulatively impact a person’s felt sense of how the world is. The conscious mind and the mind that utilizes language has limited ability to perceive and almost no ability to alter this map directly. As imagined in the enactive approach to cognition, the body shapes the world we perceive. The conscious mind functions *within* a world crafted by the emotional residue of past experiences.
Trauma challenges notions of individual separateness and offers a radical re-evaluation of what healing ourselves and society might mean. Human beings who have grown up in different cultural and social environments, with different forms of trauma and suffering in their lives, and with different degrees of support and tools to safely reoccupy their bodies have enormous variation in their patterns of *embodied knowing*. What makes particular cultures and societies unique is partially the patterns of *embodied knowing* they foster in particular kinds of bodies. Positions of marginalization might leave common traumatic patterns in bodies of a similar type. These patterns are never confined to individual bodies, however. They function in a social field. In a study of Adverse Childhood Experiences conducted by the CDC researchers found that “people typically don’t grow up in a household where one brother is in prison but everything else is fine. They don’t live in families where their mother is beaten but life is otherwise hunky-dory. Incidence of abuse are never stand-alone events,” (Van der Kolk 147). Patterns of *embodied knowing* move through society in in pockets and flows, operating mostly beneath the surface of conscious awareness. To understand *embodied knowing* as a social phenomenon allows us to use it as a framework through which we can make sense of many issues in contemporary issues in philosophy and social theory. In this chapter, I discuss some areas in which the body is already considered integral to knowledge formation and as a site for applications of power. *Embodied knowing* may both inform and be informed by notions of critique and liberation posed by contemporary philosophers.
Embodied Knowing and Scientific Knowledge

Many continental philosophers and theorists in their tradition emphasize the body and bodily intelligence as integral to knowledge production and scientific practices. Natasha Myer’s Rendering Life Molecular exemplifies a movement to document the role of bodily life in shaping scientific inquiry. Myers describes how “academic laboratories… are sites where a students’ ethos and habitus are still in formations,” (Myers 41). She defines ethos as “the tangle of affects, values, attitudes, sentiments, styles, and sensibilities that shape practice and laboratory culture,” and habitus as the “unselfconscious orchestration of practices” that condition a practitioner’s sensorium, posture, comportment, and bodily know-how,” (Myers 41). She relates how “students learn the affects, attitudes, postures, and comportments that help them cope” with scientific life, (Myers 72). These notions of Ethos and habitus are forms of embodied knowing. A part of an individual's constitution as an academic is the trained development the kinds of embodied knowing that are effective in scientific life.

Despite the notion that science is a “neutral, rational, and so disembodied practice,” in which scientists in training “are expected to dissociate their cognitive activities from their bodies,” practically, scientists do not keep their bodily life and intellectual life separate, (Myers 44). Emotions and embodied metaphors are employed constantly to help scientists understand their subject matter. Scientific practices often require the breaking of rigid demarcations between the body and object of study, the rational and the emotional. Scientists “get fully entangled with
their instruments and materials” as they “arduously [entrain] their bodies, imaginations, and instruments to the rhythms of the phenomena they desire to know,” (Myers 71). It is both the work itself and the environment that scientific work is conducted in that renders it entangled with the reality of bodily life. Scientists are also entangled with a wider society; no laboratory is ever being truly separate from the outside world.

Academic teaching laboratories are not cordoned off from broader social, cultural, economic or political forces… [scientists] are enmeshed in complex relations of power, and their lives and labors inside an outside the lab are not immune to the systemic violences, injustices, and exclusions that are contoured by capitalism, colonialism, and the intersections of race, class, and gender, (Myers 71).

Myers is one of many scholars investigating the way in which positivist and objectivist narratives are challenged by the contingent and constructed nature of bodily experience in the world. If even the laboratory is unsafe from the “subjective” influence of patterns of embodied knowing, understanding what this is and how it works is a matter no academic can ignore.

Donna Haraway, in her essay “Situated Knowledges,” calls us to consider that knowledge is always a “view from a body: always... complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured,” and never a “view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity,” (Haraway 589). The recognition that behind apparent truths there are always covert assumptions, some of which might be harmful, is a predicament around which contemporary philosophers must carefully tread. To be self-aware of the problem of truth while still pursuing more meaningful ways of modeling the self in
the world has become the object of philosophy and the social sciences. Notably, these “covert assumptions” and the way the self is embodied are deeply related.

**Embodied Knowing and Critique**

*Embodied Knowing* has deep ramifications for how we consider scientific knowledge, discourse, as well as relationships of oppression and domination. The interviewees in *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* did not end up with their particular kinds of trauma by themselves. Traumatized bodies exist in a social field with other traumatized bodies, where their ability to heal is determined by how they are mirrored, what kind of implicit messaging they receive, as well as the physical conditions of their life. Forms of *Embodied knowing* move in patterns, ripples moving through a field of traumatized bodies, via manners of social attunement, misattunement, abuse, neglect, or narrative-making. We might begin to see systems of generating certain kinds and formations of trauma as integral to constituting the human society, as a system of social control, exploitation, and means of generating identification with particular cultural groups or institutions.

Bessel van der Kolk found that traumatized people frequently “find comfort in groups where they can replay their combat experiences, rape, or torture, with others who have similar backgrounds or experiences,” (Van der Kolk 81). For these people, finding others with a “shared history of trauma and victimization alleviates their searing sense of isolation, but usually at the price of having to deny their individual differences: Members can belong only if they conform to the common code,” (Van
der Kolk 81). Similar patterns of trauma create similar group identifications and often “isolated” groups that function with their own social code. This kind of behavior is rarely healthy, as “isolating oneself into a narrowly defined victim group promotes a view of others as irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst,” (Van der Kolk 81). Van der Kolk hypothesizes that extreme examples of this are common in society in the form of “gangs, extremist political parties, and religious cults [which] may provide solace, but… rarely foster the mental flexibility needed to be fully open to what life has to offer and as such cannot liberate their members from their traumas,” (Van der Kolk 82). His research shows how identity is caught up in the kinds of traumas and socialization an individual experiences; it is not far-fetched to extend this to collective narratives, the social and political narratives of group identification or national identity. These examples demonstrate an extreme form of a kind of group identification and social rule-making practices that are not distinct to traumatized people; these shape the very architecture of all of human society.

Institutions that systematically produce certain forms of trauma also produce correlated forms of subjectivity; certain institutions may serve as “factories” for forms of embodied knowing which then continue to spread through society. Efforts to contain and control certain kinds of trauma are equally integral to constituting power. Certain patterns of trauma (ie. addiction) or narratives about the world (fear-mongering, racism) might be profitable or desirable for certain interest groups. In particular, if it is the case that certain kinds of trauma are profitable, recognizing
embodied knowing may make visible the exploitation of marginalized groups through creating and harvesting the effects of certain kinds of trauma.

Michel Foucault was integral to bringing the body back into focus in philosophical discourse. Bringing together Van der Kolk’s research on trauma with a Foucault’s writings on the body, genealogy, and critique might provide a bridge between Van der Kolk’s work and theorists interrogating systems of oppression and domination. This discussion also might inform us as to what liberation might mean on a collective or social level. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault elaborates on the relationship between power and the body, supporting this notion that the body is the surface on which the history of power is written and through which the continuing story unfolds. The body is not wholly composed of the story of social practice, but it is inscribed with its resonances: “the body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors… The body is the surface of inscription of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas, the locus of dissociation of the Me… and a volume in perpetual disintegration,” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 375). For Foucault, the body is the site where power accesses the individual, the point of control for power and also where power is encoded and internalized. It is also a “surface of inscription of events.” This might easily have a physiological correlate in patterns of disconnect from the body, numbing of particular emotional ranges or bodily sensations. He goes on to describe how subjection to power

inscribes itself in the nervous system, in the temperament, in the digestive apparatus; it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those who ancestors committed errors. Fathers have
only to mistake effects for causes, belief in the reality of an “afterlife” or maintain the value of eternal truths, and the bodies of their children will suffer… The body maintains, in life as in death, through its strength or weakness, the sanction of every truth and error, as it sustains, in an inverse manner, the origin - descent, (Nietzsche, Genealogy, History 375).

Here we can see a Foucault’s work a sense that the story of history is written in the bodies of the present. Narratives, values, and traumas are all the same kind of residue. We can extrapolate, here, that our current bodies also contain the internalized systems of power-knowledge that we have the capacity to transmit, or not, to successive generations, depending on what regimes of power-knowledge we are subjected to and to what extent we engage in practices of de-subjugation.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes that “the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body,” (Discipline and Punish 30). Here we see a notion of the body as the innermost beingness of the human, the “soul” a kind of cage constituted by subjection to disciplinary power. This implies that at least a degree of freedom from subjection might be possible. In this metaphor, a free human would be a de-subjugated body. The body alone, not acted on by power, is free. However, the “soul” as a kind of political instrument takes the power and agency of an individual away from herself, and turns it into a productive and docile force to be exploited. The body is the most base precondition for subjection and control. Perhaps, for Foucault, the soul is the story that subjection has written on all of our bodies; it is the trace that history has left on our consciousness.

Foucault describes “discipline” as the process by which society creates from the body a “docile” and “productive” unit of labor and political power. In this
relation, the body is conditioned into a state in which it is exploitable by power for economic productivity and political gain, (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 25). The ‘docile body’ is a body whose power has been removed from itself. Whatever underlying “free” body exists beneath the forces of subjection is thoroughly suffused in “a political field” in which “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out certain tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs,” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 25). This could easily be the story by which bodies are shaped into particular kinds of trauma which correlate to particular politically productive narratives about the world.

It’s notable that even mild-to-moderate forms of violence become traumatic if they are chronic, dehumanizing, and immobilizing. All three of these characterize the way institutional power works. Institutional power has the sense of being inarguable, inescapable, temporally and spatially diffuse, and larger than human. The only course of action in the face of institutionalized oppression is to shape your subjectivity around that oppression. Institutionalized oppression is, in fact, the perfect way to create subtle forms of trauma in a population. Notably, trauma is unconscious. The disciplining of the body such that a person’s agency benefits power, while they remain unconscious of their own exploitation or shaping, maps onto both the unconsciousness of trauma, and its relationship to narrative and perceptual distortions. The kinds of institutions that control our lives shape our embodied realities in critical ways, which therefore shape our minds and very subjectivities.
Environmental philosopher Stacy Alaimo similarly sees the body as the site of oppression, but notes also the permeability of the boundaries around purity and pollution. Pollution, particular kinds of oppression, poverty, and trauma, all have the body (or the body of the Earth) as a subject. Pollution is “uncontainable”; purity is incredibly difficult to control and regulate, and tends to move through society in complex and unpredictable patterns.

Workers bodies are not only the sites of direct applications of power, but permeable sites that are forever transformed by the substances and forces—asbestos, coal, dust, radiation, that penetrate them. In the early 20th century, the body of the worker became the site for the institutionalization of industrial hygiene and occupational medicine, the site where businesses, and insurance industry, medicine, law, government, social reformers, labor organizations, and the workers themselves tusseled for control, (Alaimo).

Maintaining control over bodies and pollutants is very important in a capitalist system. Marginalized bodies are a dumping grounds for pollutants as well as traumatic experiences, and their bodies certainly hold those experiences, and often in ways that are productive for maintaining power. Just as many kinds of pollution are invisible within existing legal framework, a trauma-blind society renders certain kinds of bodily oppression invisible. Creating certain kinds of addictions, health problems, and maladjustment is good for business. For Alaimo, challenging notions of individual separateness and clean boundaries between human body and world makes visible certain kinds of oppression that are otherwise concealed. The notions of severely traumatized people as being “disordered” (but the rest of us being completely untraumatized) attempts to contain the “problem” of trauma within specific populations. We’ve seen that forms of embodied knowing do not respect
clean boundaries and move through societies through an osmotic process. Alaimo notes that “it has been crucial for environmental theorists to conceptualize the “agency” of nature so as not to subscribe to an ontology in which the material world is a passive resource for the exploits of the human,” (Alaimo). Putting new language on the world which falls outside of traditional political categories allows new dynamics of oppression and resistance to become visible which would otherwise have remained unseen. This is one of the potentially powerful applications of embodied knowing.

Given that we live in a trauma-blind society riddled with exploitative systems of oppression, we would expect something of a trauma epidemic in American society. Evidence suggests this is the case. “Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witnessed their mother being beaten or hit” (Van der Kolk 1). The most devastating study, the ACE study of Adverse Childhood experiences was conducted on 17,000 interviewees who were “mostly white, middle class, middle aged, well educated, and financially secure enough for them to have good medical insurance.” Even of a relatively privileged demographic, “only one-third of the respondents reported no adverse childhood experiences,” (Van der Kolk 147). A firm majority of adults in the US have experienced some kind of traumatic event that would, without proper tools to process, integrate, or heal from,
remain a feature of their bodily experience and continue to affect their relationships with their families, friends, and communities. Early childhood trauma was found to have huge long-term effects. Higher scores on the ACE study correlate to “higher workplace absenteeism, financial problems, and lower lifetime income,” (Van der Kolk 148). Implications for mental health were severe, “as ACE score rises, chronic depression in adulthood also rises dramatically,” (Van der Kolk 148). ACE scores also rose proportionally with the likelihood of being on an antidepressant medication or prescription painkillers, (Van der Kolk 148). As a person’s ACE score increases, “suicide attempts rise exponentially,” as does drug use and rates of addiction, (Van der Kolk 148). “People with an ACE score of four were seven times for likely to be an alcohol than adults with a score of zero, (Van der Kolk 148). Rates of intimate partner violence increased; “for boys who witness domestic violence, the risk that they will abuse their own partners rises sevenfold,” (Van der Kolk 149).

Interestingly, incidence of serious chronic illness correlated to ACE score as well. “Those with an ACE score of six or above had a 15 percent or greater chance than those with an ACE score of zero of currently suffering from any of the ten leading causes of death in the United States, including COPD, ischemic heart disease, and liver disease. They were twice as likely to suffer from cancer and four times as likely to have emphysema,” (Van der Kolk 149). Researchers responsible for administering the study found the overall costs of child abuse for health outcomes “exceeded those of cancer or heart disease,” (Van der Kolk 150). They found that “eradicating child abuse in America would reduce the overall rate of depression by
more than half, alcoholism by two-thirds, and suicide, IV drug use, and domestic violence by three-quarters. It would also have a dramatic effect on workplace performance and vastly decrease the need for incarceration” (Van der Kolk 150).

We live in a painfully disembodied society. Traumatized bodies are at risk of using addictive coping mechanisms to escape overwhelming sensations, making traumatized communities sources of ongoing income for corporations or systems that profit off of addictive behavior. A traumatized population, dependent on addictive substances and practices, including alcohol, tobacco, television, junk food, and opiates, has little ability to take control over their lives.

Van der Kolk describes how this has happened in the domain of mental health issues in the last half-century. Since the 1970s, “drugs have displaced therapy and enabled patients to suppress their problems without addressing the underlying issues,” (Van der Kolk 36). If mental health issues are considered “chemical imbalances” rather than caused by poverty, violence, trauma, and cycles of abuse and neglect, this renders certain dynamics of oppression invisible, while generating more and more traumatized bodies as an entirely new resource for capital to exploit. To view human disorders as chemical imbalances ignores the role of the body and trauma in producing them, and thereby “takes control over people’s fate out of their own hands and puts doctors and insurance companies in charge of fixing their problems,” (Van der Kolk 37).

Given that treatment rates are increasing, one would expect that rates of mental illness in the US would be on the decline. Van der Kolk describes how “the
number of people treated for depression has tripled over the past two decades” and that “one in ten Americans now take antidepressants,” (Van der Kolk 37). Despite this dramatic increase in rates of treatment, the prescription rates, antidepressant use “has not made a dent in hospital admissions for depression,” (Van der Kolk 37). He concludes that “if [antidepressants] were indeed as effective as we were lead to believe, depression should be now have become a minor issue in our society,” (Van der Kolk 37). In the US today “half a million children… currently take anti-psychotic drugs,” and “children from low-income families are four times as likely as privately insured children to receive antipsychotic medication,” (Van der Kolk 37). These drugs are commonly prescribed to “make abused or neglected children more tractable,” (Van der Kolk 37). In a trauma-blind society, the effects of trauma, which manifest in health issues, social deviance, addiction, and cycles of abuse and neglect, are pathologized and treated inappropriately. The kinds of oppression that create such dynamics are rendered invisible. In the context of global capitalism, certain kinds of health issues and addictive behaviors even become sources of profit.

Here, I’ve just explicated Van der Kolk’s analysis of the use of pharmaceuticals for mental health concerns. The manners in existing systems engender trauma, and the bodies they produce are exploited for profit, could be the subject of another thesis. This is the ultimate form of discipline, as described by Foucault. In a trauma-blind society, marginalized bodies can be used as “containers” for trauma, rendering them radically unconscious, radically disembodied, suffering from severe emotional and perceptual distortions, and invested in tribalistic identities,
only socially attuned to a narrow group of similarly traumatized people. Their bodies and minds have become essentially resources to be harvested by capital.

Patterns of embodiment, if not made visible, can be unconsciously shaped exploitation and abuse of marginalized communities without the perpetrators having to take responsibility. Trauma is integral to constituting the experience of living in America; it is important for constituting our healthcare system, it is the back-end of mass incarceration, it is the unseen story behind addiction, depression, and anxiety. It is the unseen, unacknowledged force that keeps our institutions running in the way they do. Many people profit enormously off having large, traumatized, controlled populations who will behave in predictable ways and be long-term consumers of resources they provide; drugs, alcohol, prison time, television, junk food, pharmaceuticals, and compulsive consumerism.

Foucault viewed the ultimate project of the intellectual to be the desubjugation of the body from regimes of power. Critique, for him, is “the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question the truth of its effects on power and question power on its discourses of truth… Critique would essentially ensure a de-subjugation of the subject in the context of what we would call, in a word, the politics of truth,” (Foucault, “What is Critique” 32). Perhaps this “de-subjugation” is the equivalent to the freeing of the body from the “prison of the soul,” which could be imagined as the total of internalized trauma. Genealogy, “as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history,” (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 376). It is a project of unpacking the body as a site of subjection
for discourses of power, an investigation of bodily residues of power and its ripples through populations and places over time. It’s a history of bodies, what they have been subjected to, and how they carry that subjection with them and transmit it onward; “the purpose of the present study is to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body, to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible..” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 152). Foucault appears to consider the goal of the critical project the de-subjugation of the body from the external applications of power-knowledge.

The kinds of critical work undertaken by Foucault and philosophers like Alaimo and Myers attempt to bring attention back to the body as critical to scientific practice and power relations, but none of them appear to be conscious of the way trauma works. As a result, they continue in a tradition of prioritizing intellectual and abstract modes of understanding over bodily modes of understanding. Yet, if the body is the site of subjection of power, and freeing the body from subjection the object of critique, then methods of working with the body would seem to be critical. Oppression affects the *whole human being*. So liberation must also be *of the whole human being*. Van der Kolk’s research strongly supports this, suggesting that effective critique must include a process of learning to befriend bodily sensation. De-subjugation requires us to re-occupy the body, to integrate and make peace with the kinds of trauma that we have unconsciously internalized. A purely intellectual critique is not the most effective.
Recognizing that many social issues have an underlying reality of bodily trauma gives a new possibilities for healing as communities. Firstly, acknowledging trauma as a process of disembodiment leaves us with a conception of the human being who has the capacity to heal themselves. Humans have the ability to “regulate our own physiology, including some of the so-called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving, and touching,” (Van der Kolk 38). Systemically training these skills is integral to permanently treating and healing from traumatic events. The re-occupation of the body is a challenging process, but one over which an individual has agency. It’s also one that is accessible to every person regardless of class, gender, or race. In this, it gives marginalized communities agency over their own healing process. It views the human being as capable of reclaiming their own agency. Each person can embark on their own process of learning to manage their bodily life themselves. Ignoring trauma overlooks the fact that “our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another,” (Van der Kolk 38).

Furthermore, it makes liberatory work more effective. Lama Rod Owens, author of Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation, argues that “anyone engaged in the practice of liberation must actively discover it in their own being, and having a body-based or somatic practice is a direct way to reclaim connection to their psycho-physical connection to themselves,” (Owens 100). Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, Owens’ co-author, explains that this process of re-encountering the body “radically alters our relationship to all life and to the suffering of others,” and that this
is deeply necessary. “If you are invested in alleviating suffering, whether as an activist or change-maker or someone who’s committed to life because you hear the cries of the world, it’s important to understand that you can not even recognize the suffering of others without fully acknowledging the despair of your own suffering, (Owens 65). In other words, recognizing and integrating your own trauma is integral to liberating others. Owens notes that “when we attempt to love out of our woundedness, then our loving is only violence,” (Owens 65). We have the potential to pass certain kinds of trauma along in our work. Liberatory projects can easily become violent projects in their own right, if a person does not fully understand their own subject position. If we do not work to heal “our movement and interactions in the world are limited and selfish,” (Owens 65). Western intellectual history is littered with utopian projects and grand narratives which became violent or oppressive because they began to value being right over being nuanced. Reconciling the body allows this malleability of the psyche and humility in the face of the complexity of suffering.

Embodied practice can give a resting place and reserve of energy from which to draw for those engaged in the deeply taxing emotional labor of activism. It can help to manage the “compassion-fatigue,” which afflicts so many engaged in liberatory projects

Zen practice and training were teaching me to find a more powerful resting place that I could abide in within myself despite the chaos and calamity that living in an unjust society meant we were constantly surrounded by. It also gave me a way to be in response to sometimes overwhelming situations that could lead me to a downward spiral of anger and negativity… I could see that many activist elders and now my younger counterparts had fallen into that
vortex, and it seemed difficult to get out once you were caught there, (Owens 91).

To not have any recipe for processing and integrating difficult emotions and to try to engage in challenging intellectual work is both incredibly difficult and less effective.

The Remedy

For many, embodied practice might be an integral part of their process, but there is a wider transition that must take place. We must transition to a trauma-conscious society. We must recognize that “trauma, in any of its forms, is not a failure or a mistake. It is not something to be ashamed of, not a sign of weakness, and not a reflection of inner failing,” (Epstein 3). Rather than problematizing maladjusted behavior, there is a possibility here to recognize our collective brokenness. The kinds of trauma endured by the privileged and the marginalized may be of a different scale and different type, but there is no position of purity, no position of clear seeing. We are all disembodied, to a greater or lesser degree. We must that that “pain is not pathology,” as Epstein says. It “is the absence of adequate attunement and responsiveness to the child’s painful emotional reactions that renders them unendurable and thus a source of traumatic stress and psychopathology,” (Epstein 12). Similarly, it is not overwhelming or traumatic experiences that are a problem, it’s the way we as a society speak about them, relate to them, our comfort with bringing them to the surface and sharing the ways we are hurt that creates an environment in which collective trauma can heal. A trauma-informed society recognizes the multitudes of kinds of brokenness that characterize human life, and
removes all shame or blame from any of those kinds of experiences. It is shame that is pathological, not pain. Just as the Rorschach Test in psychology allows the same object to be made sense of differently, a recognition of the trauma in our society can potentially change the narrative from one of hopelessness, despair, and evil people doing evil things, to a broken human race, and indeed planet Earth, reeling from the collective trauma of colonialism, capitalism, and massive exploitation of the land. Fundamental to healing trauma is recognizing it; it takes the guilt and shame off of the individual or group, and allows them to see that their emotions were given to them. Anger, shame, hate, and despair are not our own, but the accidental gifts of our parents and grandparents, given as they stumbled out a haze of industrialization and modernity. If we do not recognize it, it will continue to terrorize us and others.

Environmental writer and philosopher Terry Tempest Williams uses the example of the mosaic to describe how, perhaps the way forward in the face of ecological catastrophe, requires a recognition of our various kinds of brokenness. “Shards of glass can cut and wound or magnify a vision. Mosaic celebrates brokenness and the beauty of being brought together,” (Williams, Cover). There are no universals, except perhaps one, and that is that the body itself is a key, an integral part of the picture, to understanding our prejudices and narratives of self and world. It’s the way in to unwinding and making sense of who we are and what has happened to us. But making trauma conscious cannot be a purely intellectual exercise. It must be a personal, embodied exercise.
Chapter 4. Embodied Knowing in Tradition

We can now consider how embodied knowing is conceived of in contemplative traditions, before embarking on a critique of the way these traditions are commonly framed in discussion. Much of this has been articulated in the work of Rajiv Malhotra, who I will be pulling on heavily. Before I begin, I would like to outline several points about speaking about or on behalf of contemplative traditions, which come from a cultural and historical context different from my own. For one, there will obviously be dissidents to the views put forward by Malhotra in every Dharmic tradition. Many Dharmic traditions do in fact claim a kind of unique authority, and many are textual. But even these perspectives are built of of a metaphysical groundwork in which embodied knowing is acknowledged and shapes the way truth is conceived of and functions within society. To understand the way an embodied conception of knowledge might affects a society’s relationship to truth, we’ll need to understand more how Dharmic cultures in fact conceive of embodied knowing. We must rebuild some core philosophical positions from the ground up.

A potential critic of this thesis might ask how I could possible speak for, or generalize, an entire set of traditions that span the entire globe, experience the world differently and believe widely divergent things about it. There’s a movement towards specificity in Western academia in an effort to empower people who would otherwise be spoken for and to not make grand, unsubstantiated narratives about the way the world is. This thesis appears to be making a grand claim for massive portion of the global population, of whom I am not a member. I am arguing that Dharmic traditions
utilize *embodied knowing* as an epistemological category already, despite the majority of them not expressing it in those terms. I’ll address this critique further with the help of Rajiv Malhotra. Beyond this, this thesis appears to be making a strong claim about what human nature is, ie. conditionable, and holding that conditioning in the body. This is indeed a universal claim. It’s also grounded in biology and neuroscience research. While the notion of the human as deeply conditioned by experience is supported by the work of researchers like Van der Kolk Varela, and Goleman, it was realized first by contemplative traditions through first-person investigation of experience. To state that understanding the relationship between the mind and body, conditioning and mental well-being is incredibly important for human well-being is a controversial claim in Western academic circles, but is widely accepted by a massive, highly disenfranchised portion of the global population. It is certainly not my claim, but one that over one and a half billion people make everyday with their bodily life. For the most part, they do not have a position to articulate their beliefs that is considered academically legitimate. To frame this as a problematic universalizing claim repeats a history of marginalizing Dharmic world-views, perpetuating a highly problematic power-relation. Furthermore, it presumes that “disembodied” approach to academia is a sort of “default” position, rather than a neo-colonial practice which requires a highly specific process of conditioning and socialization to learn.

Malhotra effectively challenges these criticisms in his book. If we truly open ourselves up to a critique from a Dharmic perspective, we must start by understanding how knowledge is conceived of Dharmic societies. Malhotra defines dharma as “a
family of spiritual traditions originating in India which today are manifested in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism,” (Malhotra 3). Part of his aim to show how this “variety of perspectives and practices of dharma display an underlying integral unity at the metaphysical level which undergirds and supports their openness and non-aggressiveness,” (Malhotra 3). There is a tendency to ignore the weight of the collective argument made by these traditions because they appear fragmented with highly varied beliefs and practices and even conflict between practitioners. Many of the claims appear irreconcilable with modern science. And yet, this critique makes sense only from within a Western metaphysic of truth; Malhotra argues that there is an underlying coherence between Dharmic traditions that is difficult to perceive without an understanding of the way embodied knowing works.

Malhotra argues that the Judeo-Christian and Dharmic worldviews inherit their notions of truth from the religious traditions that shaped their thought. “Western foundational concepts and values stem from… Judeo-Christian historical revelations expressed through prophets and messiahs, and Greek reason with its reliance on Aristotelian logic and empirical knowledge,” (Malhotra 4). Specific, spatially and temporally located prophets from the long ago are the only sources of “absolute” truth. Since the canonical texts in Judeo-Christian religion were closed long ago, truth is necessarily linguistically bound. Access to truth is mediated by texts. Since, in this view, “every individual is born a sinner,” contemporary people “are unable to achieve union with the divine,” individual spiritual practitioners cannot claim any sort of divine authority to write or rewrite scripture, (Malhotra 6). Counterexamples
obviously exist, but by and large, this is the model for religious revelation in Judeo-Christian societies. Until the Enlightenment, there was no source of truth outside of scripture and the authority of the church.

This means that every human being’s access to truth is dependent on being immersed in a historical narrative, and their access to truth is dependent on their position within that narrative. Some people have access to truth, and others simply do not and cannot due to the circumstances of their birth. “Those without access to these historical revelations must remain, by definition, in the dark, lacking the most elementary means to make contact with God,” (Malhotra 6). There are some “chosen people,” and some societies that are “lost” (indigenous cultures). Each society must therefore make sure they are positioned correctly in the narrative, ensuring they do have access to the Truth. This creates a fundamental insecurity around being the “chosen people.” A careful curation of the historical record must take place which bordering on an obsession with history and the accuracy of knowledge. Competing worldviews become threatening; “the historical record of [biblical] intervention must be carefully maintained, and its truth must be taken forward and aggressively asserted,” (Malhotra 6). There is no room here for an ongoing, creative process of making and remaking truth. A static, rigid, grid-like truth, temporally and spatially located, extends throughout the “Godly” kingdom, ending at its edges, after which “chaos” ensues, which must gradually be subjected to the grid of truth. New territory (and societies) are “brought into” history, born in space and time, through contact with the “chosen” societies.
The goal of human life is also affected by this view; “the spiritual goal instead is salvation that can be achieved only through obedience to God’s will as understood through a particular set of prophets and historical events,” (Malhotra 6). Our salvation depends on our relationship to truth; truth must be brought under our control, to ensure we attain salvation. This means that “In the West, chaos is seen as a ceaseless threat both psychologically and socially - something to be overcome by control or elimination,” (Malhotra 8). Malhotra traces the hundreds of years of colonialism and neo-colonialism partially to this narrative of truth; “it drives the ego to become all-powerful and controlling. Socially, it creates a hegemonic impulse over those who are different,” (Malhotra 8).

By contrast, the Dharmic View of truth emerges from the concept of embodied knowing. Truth is a way of being in the world that is available to every human being. It is not canonical. It is not textual. It is realized in the body through spiritual practices, which are embodied, practical technologies for altering and developing the mind and body. “The truth is transmitted through personal practice and bodily experience as well as through personal practice with a self-enlightened master,” (Malhotra 70). Truth is a way of being in the world, a mode of consciousness, rather than a propositional formation.

A major implication of this is that far more variation in perspectives and beliefs can be allowed without being considered threatening. “Since [in Dharmic traditions] the truth about the nature of reality is attained experientially and passed from practitioner to practitioner, it follows that knowledge of the divine is varied, and
that more than one lineage may be true. It is this concept of the origin and
transmission of truth that I term embodied knowing,” (Malhotra 55). Since any
human being has the potential to access truth through their own conscious experience,
there is less effort to control, contain, or verify certain perspectives as valid or not.
Dependence a single textual or institutional authority is not necessary. Textual study
and lineage-based practice are viewed as helpful, but there is an extensive tradition of
independent study, and independently realized masters. This is because Dharmic
practitioners have “an array of embodied approaches such as yoga, shorn of any
historical grand narratives or institutional authority... available to aid the seeker,”
(Malhotra 56). There is a sheerly massive number of embodied technologies and
methods at an aspirants disposal through which they can encounter truth for
themselves. (This is however complicated by the emphasis of studying in the physical
presence of respected teachers, who are often institutionally bound.)

These practices are by and large, embodied. Spirituality is something that is
realized in the body, through embodied practices, and with person-to-person contact
with teachers. The Dharmic worldview therefore leads to an “a-historical and direct
approach to knowing the ultimate truth,” (Malhotra 56). There is an emphasis on
“direct experience and empirical testing,” (Malhotra 61). It does not suffice to hear
the accounts of other practitioners or teachers “truth is to be discovered and
rediscovered for oneself, an endeavour that requires active inner and outer
engagement,” (Malhotra 61). Knowing ideas intellectual does not suffice to become a
teacher. The dharma must be lived. It must be fully internalized in the body, becoming *embodied knowing* rather than just intellectual.

There is room for interpretation and “experimentation with techniques and their means of transmission” and a constant process of “adaptation of methods to different temperaments and life circumstances,” (Malhotra 61). Intellectual discourse is used for “the rational defence of specific tradition - not the pursuit of theory for its own sake,” (Malhotra 61). Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism share and underlying notion of that embodied knowledge is more important than theoretical, which provides unity to the way practitioners operate in the world. This “tends to be a great diversity of paths and philosophical understandings without fear of chaos,” (Malhotra 7). This leads Dharmic civilizations to be “more relaxed and comfortable with multiplicity and ambiguity than the West,” (Malhotra 8).

A potential critique of Malhotra’s exposition of the Dharmic worldview is that is highly idealized. These ideals are not always actualized in various traditions. And yet, the ability to maintain a view despite a lack of perfect coherence is precisely what characterizes the Dharmic worldview. The comfort with chaos and incoherence does not mean we should abandon the whole project and search for more particular iterations of beliefs and perspectives ad absurdum. This simply does not make sense is reality itself is fragmented, creative, dynamic, and multifaceted. The faults and incoherences between traditions do not negate their fundamental coherence; the desire for perfect coherence is a Western metaphysics of truth.
The tendency among Western academics is to consider Dharmic traditions as fragmented, philosophically varied, small cultural groups rather than as occupying a widely shared, challenging, epistemological framework. Malhotra argues that “if dharma is put forward merely as an eclectic collection of disparate ideas, it will lack the cohesiveness necessary to function as a force for change,” (Malhotra 5). Malhotra is critical of postmodernist academics who have “made it fashionable to deconstruct what its adherents called the ‘grand narratives’ of history,” which actually legitimizes a continued disenfranchisement of a Dharmic worldview. “Postmodernism… tends to undermine the particular reality of the non-Western culture that might be in need of being affirmed, protected, and developed,” (Malhotra 42). The separation of the Dharmic worldview traditions into a multitude of competing cultures only makes sense within a non-Dharmic metaphysics of truth. It only makes sense from the outside. The effect of this is that “postmodern deconstruction facilitates the digestion of dharma into the West by disassembling it into a library of random, unrelated components similar to the way clip art is clicked in dragged as useful additions to proprietary frameworks,” (Malhotra 45). They “de-contextualize them from the rest of the dharma tradition, thereby enabling them to be digested or destroyed selectively,” (Malhotra 45). This narrative, ironically, still supports a narrative of progress in which Western society is at the frontier. “The West is simultaneously protecting itself by rewriting its story in a new and renewed chauvinistic mode in which deconstruction itself is seen as the culmination and fruit of its long, singular and ineffably superior philosophical journey,” (Malhotra 44). Through making
deconstruction the “frontier,” Western society continually fails to actually take outside critique into account. While Western academics are experts at critique, such self-critique “invariably takes place within Western categories and institutions of knowledge production and, as a result, is blind to many of its shortcomings,” (Malhotra 5). An actually radical critique takes place with different pregiven epistemologies, perhaps one in which embodied knowing is understood. “Without an outside perspective on the Western mentalities they seek to deconstruct, the critiques assume an unfolding consciousness in which westerners are leaders and agents… Although it decries identity, postmodernism is thus itself the product of a history that has been shaped by particular attitudes towards difference that marginalize Indian traditions,” (Malhotra 44). These kinds of criticisms are often ignored by Western academics. This is dangerous partially because it marginalizes a massive portion of the global population, maintaining a monopoly on knowledge production among Western or Western trained academics, but also because of the what the actual content is that is ignored - the possibility of integrating embodied knowing into our cultural understanding.

Malhotra notes that, this does not require any sort of glorification of some sort of classical or “authentic” Dharmic worldview. This would be repeating the same pattern of glorifying the particular historically located perspectives on truth. “Over-emphasizing Dharmic wisdom and its precedents can lead to chauvinism (and give rise to some of the same problems that exist in the “arrogance” of the West),” (Malhotra 5). Rather, taking seriously challenges to Judeo-Christian notions of truth
(ie, allowing ourselves to begin to see the ways embodied knowing already manifest in our society, and may manifest in others), and taking seriously the technologies of changing our relationship to our bodies and minds that have been developed within Dharmic traditions, without dismissing these practices and technologies as “culture” or “religion,” or “distilling” them to scientifically validated “essences.” The closest thing to the “essence” of meditation, from a Dharmic perspective, is in the way a spiritual teacher moves through the world, speaks, walks, and is embodied.

Now that we have laid the groundwork, we will investigate a little more the way process of cultivating embodied knowing is considered in in Dharmic traditions. In traditions of embodied practice, “truth” is a way of seeing, dictated by the lived, felt experience of the body. Malhotra writes that “while [Dharmic] traditions have developed many highly sophisticated, logical and conceptual systems of discourse, embodied knowing is considered superior to the mere intellectualism of philosophical propositions…” (Malhotra 79). Certain kinds of learning are “not achievable via a hermeneutics of an inert external text… The body of the practitioner is the text,” (Malhotra 80). There are two kinds of knowledge here, and a practitioner can learn one, the other, or both. Physical practices are integral to the cultivation of an embodied form of knowledge; “the goal of physical practice, or sadhana, is to prepare the aspirant for greater attainment of knowledge… Higher knowing is actualized in the body,” (Malhotra 77). There are a multitude of kind of techniques and practices, with different purposes and effects. Some are dangerous for a beginner. Many require very clear instruction from a teacher. These “techniques for realizing truth through
the body (including the mind and senses) are abundant in Dharmic traditions,” (Malhotra 77). What these techniques share, by and large, is an emphasis on “methods of interior observation where the mind itself is employed as an instrument for gaining insight,” (Malhotra 72). Interior, direct investigation of experience is paramount, with the resulting techniques and methods of inquiry “culled from centuries of first-person empirical inquiry into the nature of consciousness and undertaken by advanced practitioners,” (Malhotra 6). There is room for anyone to create new techniques, refine existing ones, or experiment as they will with the different kinds of consciousness that emerge. Techniques or methods “are neither a code of laws nor a history of past revelations but guides for replicating and retransmitting the experience and its transformational powers. Their truth must be rediscovered and directly experienced by each person,” (Malhotra 6).

If a person is successful in their efforts, they become a living master, spiritual teacher, or guru. Then they gain a kind of authority that transcends text. “The Indian approach generally locates spiritual authority within living spiritual masters,” (Malhotra 74). Masters utilize “embodied means of transmission, usually involving direct interpersonal contact, an approach which differs from Western emphasis on the ‘objective’ study of texts, and the transmission of abstract truth,” (Malhotra 74). What makes someone a master is not textual expertise, but the kind of consciousness they embody and share with others. “A guru is not a prophet or merely an expert in some field. He embodies what he teaches others. His knowledge is… of a set of techniques and understandings designed to evoke the practitioner’s own experiential
wisdom,” (Malhotra 75). Spiritual aspirants will then come to study with the teacher, spending time in his physical proximity. “Physical proximity to guru is beneficial - because some knowledge or spiritual essence is passed nonverbally,” (Malhotra 80). There is a body to body transmission of truth which is unable to be conveyed in text. We might think here of the kind of attunement and mirroring that Bessel van der Kolk documents in his trauma research. Human beings are profoundly sensitive to subtle emotional states in other human beings. Being around people who have developed certain beneficial patterns of embodied knowing would therefore help others cultivate a similar pattern in themselves. Spiritual practice, like the spread of trauma, partially a process of osmosis. A practitioner learns by watching, feeling, and emulating the way a teacher conducts themself in the world and moves through it in daily life. It is not a set of rules or methods, but an entire way of being, which, to the trained eye, is discernible in others.

Even the words and practices outlined by dharma teachers are continually up for criticism and debate; the validity of the techniques they develop and advocate are determined by their success at generating similar states of consciousness in others. “A path is validated if enough subsequent followers of the guru accomplish the same states; otherwise, the truth claims fall by the wayside - rejected by the free market of spiritual claims,” (Malhotra 81). This kind of free market means that no individual practitioner or even tradition can stake a monopoly on knowledge claims. “The accounts and the individuals who have embarked on these quests are highly regarded, but they are not reified into canons, messiahs, or absolute statements of exclusive
nature,” (Malhotra 6). This means that “in embodied practices, there are no laws handed down from on high, and there is no closed canon,” (Malhotra 78). There are however “ever-unfolding interpretations… which are context-sensitive,” (Malhotra 78). Interactions between practitioners and texts is necessarily a relationship between the state of their body-mind and the text itself. There is a complex hermeneutics built in to every interaction; there is no “proper” interpretation of a text, because texts are as alive as the people reading them. This necessarily follows from a view of the human being which accounts for embodied knowing.

This view is complicated by the individual lineages and traditions which might be thought of as the most successful methods or techniques, which are able to sustain themselves generation after generation and sometime expand across the globe. Zen Buddhism is good example. In Zen practice, there system of direct transmission whereby each zen teacher must be “validated” by a previous one by receiving “transmission” in person-to-person interaction and after years of intensive study. Zen monasteries chant their lineage, supposedly, all the way back to the Buddha, from teacher to teacher. Zen will remain “alive” only so long as there are living teachers who have received transmission. Zen cannot be learned out of a book, and nor by an individual who meditates a lot by themselves. In schools like this, the tools and techniques employed can become highly codified, not because they represent any absolute truth, nor because they are the only way (although many Dharmic traditions claim that their way is the best), but because the weight of historical successes gives
the lineage a kind of “momentum.” It has been tested by time, and if a successive
teacher changes the practice significantly, they risk breaking the lineage.

While practitioners themselves often consider these sorts of practices spiritual
or religious, when considering Dharmic practices from the outside, the baggage of
Judeo-Christian conceptions of religion is simply overwhelming and distorts the
image of what’s happening. Malhotra suggests that “such systems might be more
accurately referred to as therapies, as opposed to religions,” because of the tendency
to misunderstand the Dharmic view of spirituality, which relies on the concept of
embodied knowing, (Malhotra 74).

The actual view of the mind that practitioners share has much in common with
the research done by Bessel van der Kolk and the enactivist approach to cognition; it
suggests a deep malleability of the mind and consciousness, depending on how we
live, and how we occupy our bodies. Liberation comes from the direct study of
internal experience, and the use of a variety of bodily methods to “purify” or
“cleanse” consciousness of obscuring factors. “One’s choices reinforce one’s
conditioning (samskaras), which in turn serve as a filter for perception. The result is
an imagined or illusory world. This theory is the shared foundation of Hindu,
Buddhist, and Jain traditions which then offer the tools to transcend this
conditioning,” (Malhotra 72). Samskaras, or mental conditioning “filters” the way we
see, and means that different human beings walk through varied perceptual worlds.
“The superimposition of the mind’s prior conditioning and context in order to
construct one’s perceptions is referred to as ‘nama-rupa.’” Nama-rupa is the result of
memory traces (‘samskaras’), which in turn are the byproducts of past impressions of wilful actions,” (Malhotra 72). How reality appears to us is determined by our past conditioning, and this conditioning can be changed and improved using a variety of embodied tools and practices. The critical distinction between Dharmic traditions and the Western reliance on history is that the meditative practices of the former remove the layers of conditioning that obfuscate one’s true self… while the West lacks both the techniques and the conceptual base to do so,” (Malhotra 57). This thesis is an attempt to build this conceptual base. The Dharmic notion of ‘samskaras’ and Van der Kolk’s conception of trauma play a startlingly similar role in constituting a person. They both obscure, alter, create a mode of perceiving the world. Both are registered in the body. Both can be resolved or lessened through embodied practice.

Malhotra’s exposition of embodied knowing as it’s used in Dharmic traditions shows a profound compatibility with the notion of embodied knowing I’ve presented so far. Embodied knowing gives us a conceptual bridge between Dharmic ways of viewing the world and Western academic philosophy. It deepens Varela, Thompson, and Rosch’s argument that embodied practice is incredibly important for intellectual and scientific work and suggests that taking seriously lived traditions of embodied practice and philosophy is very important; these traditions might just have by far the most sophisticated methods known for processing trauma, cultivating social congruence, and engendering mental and emotional well-being. Furthermore, this is incredibly important for those interested in any kind of liberatory project; movements
that fail to understand their subject position risk replicating violence and patterns of trauma in the communities they hope to help.

Notes on Framing

There is a risk here that I appear to be “stripping” Dharmic traditions of spirituality down to a secularized, palatable core, and that this leaves no room for some of the elements of these traditions that exist outside of what might be explainable in a philosophy thesis. This would reproduce the problematic dynamic whereby Westerners “digest” and “assimilate” Dharmic traditions into versions that they can appropriate and utilize for their own ends. This is a tricky line. On the one hand, if we attempt to bring the entire range of phenomenon described in different Dharmic traditions of meditation and contemplation into view at once, it becomes unintelligible within Western secular frameworks, categorized as “culture” and “religion,” and then disregarded. On the other hand, if we say that Dharmic traditions are purely secular and that all of phenomenon they describe that “do not make sense to us,” are accidents, this is also marginalizing alternative ways of experiencing the world.

Once we take embodied knowing into account, there is way to navigate this dynamic more successfully; different phenomenological worlds are available to different people, depending on the way they are embodied. The kinds of vocabulary, metaphors, and internal experiences available to an advanced practitioner are simply not available to someone who has not spent thousands of hours on the meditation
cushion, or in other forms of embodied practice. The degree of flexibility of the human mind in constructing and making sense of the its world should not be underestimated. There is not one “true” world such that people who occupy alternate realities are always “hallucinating” or incorrect. Rather, there may be different images and experiences of the world between different cultures in people which exists down to the perceptual level. The kinds of experiences documented by serious Dharmic practitioners might not be so inconceivable once we take this into perspective. The kinds of experiences documented by contemplative practitioners are only unintelligible if human minds are viewed as static, rigid, interchangeable “rational subjects.” These experiences are “supernatural only in relation to a constricted definition of the natural. It is mystical only when its analytic investigation is not completed. It is magic only when the technique involved is not understood,” (Thurman 211-212). If we view the mind and consciousness as a variable, dynamic, and evolving “processes,” than we open ourselves to the possibility of significant flexibility in people's’ experience of the world, without any of them being “incorrect.” This flexibility does not immediately require complete relativism; the body acts as a stabilizing force which shapes the bounds of what kinds of perceptual worlds are or aren’t possible or functional.

When a person spends years playing an instrument or a practicing a sport, they develop and learn to interact with subtler and subtler phenomenon within that domain. Nearly every sport or instrument or art form has a language that only serious practitioners know. The language is used to describe phenomena too subtle for the
untrained eye or hear to witness, or describe actions too subtle for the untrained body to engage in. This is an experience that we universally acknowledge to be the case. Scientific knowledge works in exactly this way - the kind of education required to speak or think “scientifically” is elaborate and requires years of intensive study. The language of science is largely unintelligible to the lay-person. Many of the experiences that are unintelligible within a secular paradigm, and the kinds of language used to describe them, might be explained in this way. These are metaphors and linguistic constructions formulated to describe phenomenological domains inaccessible to the untrained body-mind. Even given this, I will not deny possibility that serious embodied practice may raise challenges to a purely materialist metaphysics. However, if we share the belief that embodied knowing is paramount, arguing about the metaphysical implications of meditative states is actually superfluous.

Ajahn Chah, a famous meditation master from the Thai Forest tradition, explained in an interview that “without a mind honed through meditation practice, there can be no resolution of the issue of self and not-self, only beliefs and speculation,” (Jayasaro 206). Arguments between advanced practitioners and non-meditators are essentially meaningless from the perspective of traditions of embodied practice. Even if a philosophical debate about what exactly spiritual experience meant was settled and agreed upon, “true Dhamma is not something that can be communicated with words,” (Jayasaro 199). The fundamental thing that differs between the two is not beliefs but experiential realities, phenomenological fields. And
the most meaningful thing that varies between the experiential realities of advanced meditators and non-meditators is that amount of suffering present; philosophical or metaphysical realizations are meaningful only to the extent that they relieve suffering. Ajahn Chah goes on to explain that “you can’t appropriate someone else’s knowledge. If you take someone else’s knowledge, then you have to meditate on it… You have to take that understanding and then chew on it and digest it until it’s a sure thing and really your own,” (Jayasaro 199). You must “chew on” and “digest” knowledge to make it into your own. In other words, you have to incorporate into your bodily reality, or it is not meaningful knowledge at all. Discounting the claims of contemplative traditions on the basis of metaphysical disagreements only makes sense within a Western frame in which intellectual rather than embodied knowing is actually what’s at stake. The real test of Dharmic traditions, conducted on their own terms, would be a test of whether their practices do in fact relieve suffering. Teachers like Ajahn Chah were actually uninterested in convincing people of a Dharmic worldview on a purely theoretical level.

I also have no interest in making any ontological or metaphysical claims about “spirituality” or “enlightenment” in this essay. I also do not make any claims that there exists any “absolute” forms of knowledge, that there are any “pure” states of consciousness that are not conceptually mediated. These kinds of questions are not relevant to the task at hand, which is opening up Western society to the body. Questions of ontology and metaphysics are far less important than these concerns. And there are people far better equipped than I engaged in answering them. The
intelligent firepower of Western academic institutions, if redirected towards

cultivating a combination of embodied and intellectual knowing, would transform

human society in ways I cannot possibly pretend to predict. The first step is to help as

people come back into contact with their direct experience and create new

organizational frameworks which help as much of society process as much of our

collective trauma as possible so that the cycles of harming marginalized peoples,

nations, and the non-human world can stop.
Chapter 5. Reversing the Gaze

From here, we can return to consider the way meditation is considered in America today. Many imagine the scientific study of meditation to be the frontier of interaction between contemplative traditions and Western thought. Since the 1970s, the number of studies of meditation and its effects published in scientific journals has increased exponentially. Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson relate their experience as early researchers in the field in their book *Altered Traits*; “in the 1970s, when we began publishing research on meditation, there were just a handful of scientific articles on the topic. At last count there numbered 6,838 articles on the subject,” and most of these were in the last 10 years, (Goleman 14). The Mind and Life Institute was founded in 1987 and has become a bastion of research in meditation and the contemplative sciences. Scientists and Buddhist teachers alike are excited by the findings in contemplative neuroscience, and most Buddhist teachers agree that the widespread adoption of meditation practice is a good thing. The Dalai Lama in particular has played a key role in supporting dialogue between scientific and Buddhist communities and the study of traditional practices, (Goleman 15). This is necessary work and has the potential to provide insightful and profound information about the human mind and brain and the effects of contemplative practice.

Without challenging the necessity or importance of this research, I hope to offer a critical perspective on the epistemological framework from which it proceeds. Of the studies conducted on the effect of meditation on humans, “many reports boil down to investigating the way a short daily dose of meditation alters our biology and
emotional life for the better,” (Goleman 17). This kind of “short daily dose” constitutes what Goleman refers to as the “wide path” of meditation, (Goleman 3). This describes the popularized form of meditation used to promote health and well-being. It includes practitioners who meditate between twenty and forty minutes per day. Simultaneously, a secularized form of Buddhism has become popular. Books such as “Why Buddhism is True” which describes how Buddhist practice can relieve suffering while promoting a version of Buddhism “stripped of some supernatural elements typically found in Asian Buddhism, such as belief in reincarnation and in various deities,” (Wright). Author Stephen Batchelor became famous for his books “Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist,” and “Buddhism Without Beliefs.” The result is that the scientific study of embodied practice is primarily framed as a problem of determining what is “true” in contemplative traditions, without allowing it to challenging Western epistemologies or notions of self in the world. The “subject,” which is Western scientific culture, seeks to gain knowledge of meditation but remain unchanged. Since, in the traditional sense, the express purpose of the practice of meditation is to challenge a practitioner’s subject position, this which is actually no understanding of meditation at all.

These trends ignore the traditional uses of meditation as a radical, liberatory, and counter-cultural practice. The other view of meditation, the “deep path,” as described by Goleman, is the one in which meditation is a way of life, (Goleman 3). It describes the practices of monks in traditional settings who practice to change their perception of self-in-the-world. This is the form of meditation that is philosophically
challenging. Currently, meditating is viewed as “healthy” and “productive” when practiced up to a certain amount, but if the context and quantity changes, it becomes “religious,” and therefore epistemologically unintelligible within Western frameworks. In this dynamic, traditions of contemplative practice are rendered unchallenging, philosophically neutered and meditation is reduced to “small daily doses.” This not only participates in a long history of marginalizing traditional forms of knowledge, but may actually miss the very offering contemplative traditions have for us, which is precisely a challenge to our subject position and a call back to recognizing embodied knowing.

There is another belief tied up in common views of the “deep path” of meditation. It’s the belief that this kind of meditation is for “other-people,” for dark-skinned bodies engaging in exotic kinds of spirituality on faraway mountaintops. This is dangerous, too. I attended a six-day silent retreat at Zen Mountain Monastery this winter where participants slept between four and a half and seven hours per night and meditated between eight and ten hours a day. By the end of the retreat, over ninety people were in the meditation room, almost all white, upper-middle class folks from the New York City area. When the retreat was over, they returned to their jobs and lives. This is not an experience to be undertaken lightly. Many come from secular backgrounds. Many would describe themselves as atheists. Americans are engaging with contemplative traditions in a way that defies images either of the appropriative hippy or of the brown-skinned sage on the mountain-top, and we lack a framework to understand what this means. This kind of practice is unintelligible within existing
frameworks of “secular” and “religious” meditation. If there’s anything that has been revealed by meditation research, it’s that these kinds of practices cannot be reduced to “culture.” Meditation does restructure cognition; scientifically, we know this is true. However, what meditation does to the mind is altogether uncharted territory for Western science and philosophy. The exoticized archetype of the meditator, which keeps serious meditation practice properly relegated to Asian countries, marginalizes the voices of the teachers from contemplative traditions who have made it their life’s work to share liberatory frameworks with Western audiences, who believe that we are fully capable of learning what they know, and view it as incredibly important that we do learn it.

A Western monk and scholar, Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote a long statement on the appropriation of meditation into secular contexts, the whole of which is worth including here:

We need to strike a balance between caution and appreciation. There is a real danger that scientists who investigate traditional eastern contemplative practices might be swayed by materialistic premises to explain their efficacy reductively, on the exclusive basis of neurophysiology. There is a real danger that the contemplative challenge might be reduced to a matter of gaining skill in certain techniques, dispensing with such qualities as faith, aspiration, devotion, and self-surrender, all integral to the act of ‘going for refuge.’ However, I do not think we need be alarmed about the adaptation of Buddhist practices for secular ends. I call to mind a statement the Buddha made in the weeks before his death: ‘The Tathagata has no closed fist of a teacher with respect to teachings…

If such practices benefit those who do not accept the full framework of Buddhist teaching, I see no reason to grudge them the right to take what they need. To the contrary, I feel that those who adapt the Dhamma to these new purposes are to be admired for their pioneering courage and insight. As long as they act with prudence and a compassionate intent, let them make use of
the Dhamma in any way they can to help others. At the same time, I also believe that it is our responsibility, as heirs of the Dhamma, to remind such experimenters that they have entered a sanctuary deemed sacred by Buddhists. Thus, respectful towards their sources, they should pursue their investigations with humility and gratitude. They should recognize that while the Dhamma bids everyone come and take what they need, they are drawing from an ancient well of sacred wisdom that has nourished countless spirits through the centuries and whose waters still retain their potency for those who drink from them today. (Bhikkhu Bodhi 35-36)

Bhikkhu Bodhi, as with most Buddhist teachers I know of, supports the adoption of meditation into secular contexts. It does and will continue to help people. But there is caution in his tone. It’s important that we do not think that we “understand” meditation through reduction or simply as cultivating a skill. The appropriation and use of meditation in “short daily doses” is only a problem if means we shut our ears to tradition. We must stay open to learning and be willing to challenge held notions of the human being, and understand that, in this domain, Western society is full of novices, most of whom are just beginning to encounter a Dharmic worldview or the the study of direct experience for the first time.

In the popular view, the Western Scientist is presented as the “defender” of the border of a rigid grid of truth, as described by Malhotra, letting in only what outside influence has been “confirmed” by the scientific method. This is a precisely a “shutting of the ears.” Buddhism in this view is almost considered like a virus which must be deactivated by science, and thus made into a vaccine, which can be accepted into society. The metaphysical and epistemological claims of Buddhism are not considered on their own terms, and considerable work is done to categorize them
under “culture” and “religion” using Judeo-Christian conceptions of religion are entirely foreign to Buddhist thought. We split Buddhism into an “applied practice” which is worthy of study, and “cultural and religious baggage,” which is the domain of religious studies and anthropology departments. This is despite the fact that Buddhist teachers operate within a very different epistemological framework which values \textit{embodied knowing} over intellectual knowing. This process still holds the “Western-knowledge making institutions” as having the power to do this splitting, and upholds a Western epistemology as the true or default way of knowing the world.

To take this critique further, and consider another voice, we might look to Harold Roth, the director of the Department of Contemplative Studies at Brown University. Roth is heavily critical of the way contemplative traditions are treated in the majority of Western academic environments. In his essay “Against Cognitive Imperialism,” Roth notes that “so many scholars of religion—who put such a high value on contextualizing the religions they study—fail to contextualize themselves,” (Roth 9). This “contextualizing the self” requires a inquiry into the inheritances of Judeo-Christianity. Most academic departments share the assumption “that “genuine religions” must see God as the Ultimate Reality,” (Roth 3). Acknowledgements of non-theistic religions continue to use a “template” of theistic religions by which they conduct their analyses. Religion is considered by default to be a set of beliefs about the supernatural. The divide between the natural and the supernatural is inherited from a conception an “anthropomorphic God… separated from creation by an unbridgeable gulf,” (Roth 4). Such a notion, of God as “outside of,” “distinct from,”
or “cut off from” experiential reality itself is foreign to Dharmic traditions. The
notion that religion requires belief in a truth “outside of” lived experience completely
denies the possibility that anyone is actually living their religion. If “‘supernatural
concepts’ are one of the essential defining characteristics of religion,” this means that
religions “are never based on based on actual experience” (Roth 4). The idea of the
“supernatural” “is drawn from worldviews that seek causes for natural events in
forces or powers that cannot be perceived within the natural world,” (Roth 4). This is
a disembodied notion of religion. It relies on a notion of “transcendent” spirituality
that must be worshipped but is not immanent; is not our bodies and minds themselves
that are sacred. This is opposed to practice-based traditions in which the human being
is fundamentally divine. Dharmic practices are not designed to foster belief in a
transcendent reality, but to fully reconcile our resistance to this bodily reality. This is
an act of critique and resistance of the social and cultural forces that constitute us and
an investigation into what it means to be human. It is not a belief but a practice.
Physical technologies of self-study are both necessary and sufficient to constitute a
Dharmic practitioner; no belief is necessary. This is a settling into embodiedness
rather than an effort to escape. It is the opposite direction of the transcendent.

Nietzsche, Jantzen, and Western Symbolic of Truth

This dialectic between immanent and transcendent conceptions of truth has
been observed within the Western academic tradition. Friedrich Nietzsche traced the
pursuit of objectivity which has long characterized the Western intellectual tradition
to the Christian conception of God. “The belief upon which science rests remains a
metaphysical belief. We seekers after knowledge today, we godless ones and
anti-metaphysicians, we too continue to take our flame from that fire ignited by a
belief which is millenia old, that Christian belief, which was also Plato’s belief, that
God is the truth and that the truth is divine,” (Nietzsche 127). Feminist philosophers
of religion have picked up on this notion, and elaborated it further. Feminist
philosopher Grace Jantzen describes how the “Western masculinist symbolic has been
constituted and guaranteed by the postulation of a locus of being and truth outside the
world, from which the world and all that is in it is derivative,” (Jantzen 282). This
Masculinist symbolic is a nexus of ideas which serve an organizing framework for
philosophical (and therefore scientific) thought. Masculinity, objectivity, reason,
order, transcendence, and God form one end of this symbolic. The other end is
characterized by femininity, the earth, heaviness, chaos, madness, and the devil.
Lived experience itself is rendered “untrue” in this narrative, and truth made
inaccessible. “It has regularly been thought that transcendence is characteristic of the
divine, and that it is the polar opposite of materiality,” (Jantzen). The pursuit of truth,
historically, has been conceived of as a “over-coming of bodily immanence and the
achievement of ‘disembodied and gender-neutral transcendence,” (Jantzen). Humans
are damned to eternally grasping at truth, but live in a realm that is fundamentally
chaotic and spiritually bankrupt.

Historically, the task of pursuing truth was only available to men, who were
thought to have greater access to this realm than women do. The greater
“embodiedness” of women prevented their clear vision. In order to gain knowledge, men “must deny their bodies and emotions to become pure and rational spirit,” (Jantzen 276). This pursuit of scientific “objectivity” is an inheritance of Christian notions of the divine as being masculine, extraterrestrial, and transcendent. This kind of truth is disembodied, aperspectival, a kind of “all-knowing” view. The divide between the supernatural and natural, immanent and transcendent, is a product of Judeo-Christian theology, and it is the very tool with which scholars attempt to break apart and study other spiritual traditions. This has resulted in an “unreflective ethnocentrism [which] has led them to restrict their sources to religions that fit into the accepted cognitive models of their own European religious traditions, (Roth 5).

Interestingly, Jantzen argues that, the solution to the “Western masculinist symbolic” is a kind of bringing back of the “immanence” of the divine in the physical; “transcendence is not the opposite of immanence: indeed immanence is a necessary condition for transcendence, since no one can achieve intelligence or creativity without the requisite physical complexity. Rather, immanence and transcendence are together opposite to reductionism,” (Jantzen 276). This is a bringing of the emotional and physical reality of the body back to the table. It is perhaps, recognizing the divinity of the body, of lived experience itself. Jantzen’s analysis displays either ethnocentrism or ignorance in neglecting to mention a very large global tradition that never lost or abandoned the body. It ignores Dharmic which have for thousands of years seen “humanity’s self-realized consciousness as the highest reality,” (Malhotra 56). This kind of thought also adds an entire layer of
meaning to the work of female Zen teachers in the United States like Roshi Joan Halifax, Roshi Sherry Chayat, or Roshi Jan Chozen Bays; the ideal of the embodied divine feminine has already returned to the US.

The current trend of making meditation an object for third-person study participates in this same tradition. It is also an inheritance of Christianity, an attempt to determine what is “real” beneath the chaos of subjective experience. It’s an attempt to take knowledge out of the body and into a transcendent domain. This is ironic with a practice like meditation, which is a tool for cultivated bodily knowledge. This is not to say such research should not proceed, but that the way it is framed is entirely nonsensical from a Dharmic viewpoint. The entire tradition of locating truth outside of experience is itself a spiritually and philosophically confused effort. This would be relatively innocuous if it was not a continuation of a colonial and neo-colonial project that marginalized traditional knowledge systems, created industrial capitalism, and precipitated ecological catastrophe. It’s still not actually listening.

Just because there is no divide between natural and supernatural in Dharmic traditions, this does not mean every phenomenon described within them is necessarily intelligible within our world system. I am not trying to present a secularized or clean version of complex worldviews. But if what is at stake is embodied knowing rather than intellectual knowing, it is actually entirely irrelevant whether or not you believe such stories or cosmologies, unless you yourself are having experiences of them.

The second critique Roth poses of the way Western academia relates to Dharmic traditions is related; if religion is about “belief,” then it cannot be about
experience. There is no acknowledgement that “some traditions derive their concepts and understanding of the functioning of consciousness completely empirically, grounded in experience,” (Roth 4). Roth argues that these the functions of effects of these practices “can be proven again and again by contemplatives and “contemplative scientists” who follow the same procedures of working in the common laboratory of their own consciousnesses,” (Roth 4). There is an a priori dismissal of the notion that many practitioners of religion are experiencing their religion, not just believing in it. Their perceptual reality is a religious or spiritual reality, to the extent that telling them to “stop believing” is practically non-sensical. It demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of what it means to live in the body of a religious or spiritual person. This entire framework betrays an underlying “assumption that our European religious conceptions — together with our philosophical and now scientific conceptions — of human experience contain the only possible veridical models. Thus any tradition that posits veridical cognition that does not fall within these models is ipso facto false and delusional, (Roth 5).

A clear example of this is debates around “unmediated perception,” which I stake no claim in, but I do believe demonstrate a certain kind of problematic dismissal of others’ experiences. “Mystical traditions the world over argue that it is only when these mediating cognitive categories are stripped away that genuine intuitive knowledge and clear cognition can begin to develop, yielding experience that is truly noetic,” (Roth 5). The a priori assertion that such experiences are not truly “unmediated” “rests on the assumption that he, as a modern European child of the
Enlightenment, understands more about what the world’s great mystics have experienced than those mystics themselves,” (Roth 5). Roth calls this an “ethnocentric hubris... characteristic of the European imperialists who once dominated the world in the name of their cultural superiority,” (Roth 5). Roth calls this entire system, whereby Western academics disregard alternative views without acknowledging their own metaphysical assumptions, “cognitive imperialism,” (Roth 5).

If all experience is conceptually mediated, if we can “only cognize the world through the categories imprinted within us by our historical and cultural context,” then even religious experience itself “only tells us what our religion already knows, so there is absolutely no point in trying to understand or assess it, because it yields no genuine “objective” knowledge about the world.” (Roth 6). In this view, all of religious experience is historically contingent and constructed. This leads to the dominant mode of conducting academic work in the field of religion, which Roth calls “historicist reductionism,” a mode of research that is “dominated by historicist agendas that assert that all aspects of religion—particularly the epistemic insights that derive from their practices—are totally determined by their historical and social context,” (Roth 9). Religion is a rendered a purely third-person phenomenon. It “must never, without exception, be studied from the insider, first-person perspective, (Roth 9). Alan Wallace notes how this perspective relies on a kind of metaphysical realism or objectivism which supposes that holds that “1. The real world consists of mind-independent objects; 2. There is exactly one true and complete description of
the way the world is; 3. Truth involves some sort of correspondence between an existing world and our description of it.” (Wallace, “Intersubjective Worlds” 309).

We can then recall how the enactivist approach to cognition problematizes realism, and provides a framework for understanding the human mind in which reality is “enacted” by body, brain, and world. The attempt to “strip” religion of first-person experience, in attempt to find out what is “real” (ie. material) in it is both scientifically unwarranted, reenacts the Western Masculinist Symbolic, and perpetuates the kind of Cognitive Imperialism described by Roth. We recall Malhotra’s critique of the tendency, in a Judeo-Christian worldview, describing, controlling, stabilize history into a particular narrative. Historicist reductionism as a practice of studying religion is an effort to strip embodied knowing and first-person experience out of religion, to synthesize the perfect “realist” narrative of what religion “actually” is. Historicist reductionism, especially when applied to contemplative practices, reveals a practically neurotic attempt to control and stabilize truth amidst the ever-shifting reality of subjective experience and alternate interpretation. It reveals a fundamental fear of chaos within a Judeo-Christian epistemology of truth. This is not a given. The effort way meditation is studied today reveals a lack of self-awareness of how Judeo-Christian metaphysics shape our notions of truth. Embodied knowing helps us deconstruct these oppressive power-relations which undermining effective dialogue across cultures.
The Problem of Truth

Now we might reverse the gaze to consider how embodied knowing might help us reframe the problem of truth in Western philosophy. Contemporary philosophers like Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton call us back to our bodies, to “perspectival” seeing, as the closest we can get to objectivity. Haraway, in her essay “Situated Knowledges”, notes that “objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision,” (Haraway 582-83). It’s not that we must stop looking for more useful ways thinking about the world, but we must recognize that each way of seeing is based on a bodily reality. Every perspective is limited. She famously asks “with whose blood were my eyes crafted?” (Haraway 585). This is reminiscent of our earlier discussions of Foucault; the narratives and entire worldview we carry with us is held in the body and sculpted out of trauma. We must dig to discern whose views have we inherited and who’s suffering is hidden beneath them. These questions are by no means self-evident or easy to answer. Donna Haraway also notes that “we are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology to link meanings and bodies,” (Haraway 585). There denotes that some serious inquiry, perhaps embodied inquiry, is necessary fully comprehend our own subject position. An investigation of the “semiotic-material technology” may be also mean a direct investigation of the body. For Haraway, a fully self-aware perspectival view is the closest we can come to objectivity. We must
insist “on the particularity and embodiment of all vision… and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment and second-birthing allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity,” (Haraway 582). In contemporary feminist philosophy and critical theory, the solution to universalism, to objectivism, to the masculinist symbolic, is a return to the bodily experience. It is a self-aware subjectivity. This requires a deliberate practice of self-investigation and suspicion of that which appears self-evident or objective. The actualization of this project might well be a systemic and thoughtful approach to embodied practice.

The Enlightenment Ideal / The Disembodied Ideal

The Enlightenment ideal of a detached, outside observer of reality, of access truth in a pure form, has repeatedly served to reinforce masculinist, racist, anthropocentric ideas and ways of being. The pursuit of “objectivity” is tied up with the massive suffering inflicted on the planet and humanity by colonialism, neo-colonialism, environmental degradation, and inequality caused by unchecked capitalism. The pretension of objectivity allows those in control of the scientific and political apparatus to feel justified in their position and invulnerable to criticism. Enlightenment ideals allowed colonial states a framework in which they could claim a monopoly on truth, but racist and exploitative ideologies were often smuggled into the knowledge produced. Social darwinism, Scientific Racism, Marxism, and Nazism all appealed to the validation of scientific communities, or created their own scientific communities, to justify their missions.
There is another way to describe this, using notions of embodied knowing. Colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the environmental catastrophe, and inequality caused by unchecked capitalism are symptoms of a culture of disembodiment; it’s a byproduct of a forgetting of the body, a subjugation of the body, and a minimization of the body. First our own bodies and then others. The ideal of the rational white colonial man was the disembodied man, and it was precisely this disembodiment that allows the colonizer to ignore their feelings, to remain unconscious of their feelings, and abandon conscience, to “fail to see” the suffering of others. This is Van der Kolk’s “lack of attunement” on an enormous scale.

Environmental philosopher Timothy Morton describes the progression from early modernism to the postmodern era as one of repeated humiliation. He notes that the “the truth of the word humiliation itself… means being brought low, being brought down to earth,” (Morton 17). The modernist has been repeatedly forced to recognize the limitations of their knowledge partially through the catastrophic violence of two world wars and the advent of the nuclear age. The eventual end of being brought “down to earth” is being brought back into the body. But there is perhaps a further form of humiliation necessary beyond the humiliation of “unknowing”; there is a deeper humiliation in seeing perhaps that there are others who do know, who have known all along. Perhaps progress is not linear but cyclical; the progression of Western philosophy is not from pre-modern to modern to post-modern to chaos, but from returns from post-modern into a synthesis with unheard pre-modern voices. We bring with us what we have learned in the process,
synthesizing the whole back into an underlying unity. If there’s anything that characterizes modernism, it’s the belief that human beings are able to understand reality. Unfortunately, in practice, modernism described belief that straight white male property-owning human beings are able to understand reality. It requires enormous humility to consider that perhaps there is a tradition outside the West that is and has been deeply correct, but the West was not listening. This might be the only way to actually realize the post-modern ideal.

Moving Forward

The first major implication of integrating Embodied Knowing as framework to consider the world is that it will revolutionize cognitive science. Roth and Thompson both outline vision for future scientific investigation. Both promote a view that “systematic training of consciousness through contemplative disciplines is a prerequisite for truly understanding and experiencing the role of the subjective in this intersubjective world,” (Roth). Thompson advocates combining both first and third-person inquiry, pulling on tools from contemplative traditions to support such an investigation.

I believe that a mature science of mind would have to include disciplined first-person methods of investigating subjective experience in active partnership with the third-person bio-behavioral science. “First-person methods” are practices that increase an individual’s sensitivity to his or her own experience through the systematic training of attention and self-regulation of emotion. This ability to attend reflexively to experience itself—to attend not simply to what one experiences (the object) but to how one experiences it (the act)—seems to be a uniquely human ability and mode of experience we do not share with other animals. First-person methods for
cultivating this ability are found primarily in the contemplative wisdom traditions of human experience, especially Buddhism. Throughout history religion has provided the main home for contemplative experience and its theoretical articulation in philosophy and psychology. . . . Thus [religion is] a repository of first person methods that can play an active and creative role in scientific investigation itself. (Thompson, “Empathy and Human Experience,” 261–2).

Pulling from technologies of self-inquiry from contemplative traditions and combining these with rigorous scientific study may prove highly fruitful for cognitive science. What Roth adds to this, which I agree with, is a commitment to seeing our metaphysical and spiritual baggage. We must make sure that we “do not a priori commit ourselves to the historicist reductionism that assumes that [meditation] experiences are epistemologically invalid,” (Roth 18). This itself as a metaphysical assumption and a neo-colonial practice of “unlistening.” We must admit “the fact that despite pretending to be objective and value-neutral, scholars of religion and human cognition have their own subjective biases that are enmeshed in their cultural presuppositions about the nature of religion and in their own personal experience of it,” (Roth 18). A commitment to dismantling the internalized modes privileging Western epistemologies and metaphysics would mean actually giving meditation teachers a new kind a platform through which they could enact change in the world at large. In granting a kind of intellectual authority to the respected meditation teachers from traditions of embodied practice, we open ourselves to a massive, revolutionary potential for dialogue of a magnitude imagined by Varela. This is an additional step beyond just creating a new field of contemplative neuroscience; it is a breaking down
the epistemological barriers which keep traditions of embodied knowing relegated to philosophical illegitimacy.

Finally, Van der Kolk provides a critical new layer to this analysis, which might be revolutionary on its own. Embodied Knowing creates a bridge connecting psychology and neuroscience to the social sciences, opening a new field of research as to how trauma is encoded in the body, how it shapes our perception, and how this scales up to effect macro-level phenomenon in society. It allows the investigation of how trauma and patterns of embodied knowing move through populations, as well as how they correlate with identity, beliefs, and political preferences. It provides both a new language to describe social problems, and potentially tools through which to counteract them through treating trauma on a collective scale. Previously intractable social problems may well be remedied in part through widespread practices of re-embodiment and interventions which foster positive community. This kind of liberatory praxis restores agency to oppressed populations themselves, allowing them to break cycles of intergenerational trauma, abuse, and addiction themselves, through deeply encountering their own body without expensive external interventions. Van der Kolk’s research demonstrates that scholars of social theory, critical theory, cultural studies, or generally those scholars interested in liberation to take seriously embodied practice as a liberatory tool, and one necessary for encounter a person’s own subjectivity and identity.

If embodied practices come to be understood as a tool for understanding one’s own subject position, they will become an integral tool for academics in all
disciplines. *Embodied knowing* shapes the way we view practitioners in other fields, bearers of other kinds of knowledge. It shapes the way we view other kinds of bodies and subjectivities at a subconscious level. It shapes the way we think about our studies in the context of service to society. It shapes the way we feel about the society we serve in, how we feel about the natural world, and our general attitude of friendliness, trust, or aversion, and distrust to other people. It shapes the narratives that we feel are meaningful to tell. This field of the body affects our perception and frames the subject position from which we see the world, and this, in turn, effects which kinds of intellectual practices we are drawn to, and how we go about framing our conscious thought. Both outer and internal study are necessary to understand the world, given the extent to which our perception affects what we see. This will help break down the disconnect between academics, scientists, and non-academics. Developing emotional integration and attunement will challenge notions of academics as “out-of-touch” or “too-heady,” allowing them to communicate their work more effectively to the general public. This will be essential to allow them to work more effectively to mobilize responses to the problems of the 21st century, particularly climate catastrophe.

Van der Kolk shows how, for many people with severe backgrounds of trauma, diving directly into embodied practice is not actually effective or safe. This reveals the need for a general cultural shift, not just the some utopian project of building massive meditation centers, but a shift by which society must reorient towards building our lives and practices around the body rather than around capital or
other instrumentalizing forces. The route to health for most people, from the perspective of Van der Kolk’s work, is firstly a gentle coming into the body, leaning into the discomfort that arises there, and coming into positive community.

Finally, we might come to understand “evil” people as traumatized people and destructive and oppressive patterns as spatially and geographically located patterns of bodily trauma for which appropriate remedies can be thought up. This creates an actual image or course of action by which liberation might happen, which in itself is would be massively beneficial. The role of positive community and honoring the messages of the body are emphasized, and the importance of emotional health and pliancy for human well-being is remembered.

The Academic Experience

From here, we might consider what the Western academic and scientific culture looks like from the perspective of a Dharmic worldview, or Dharmic body, as it were. This exploration will not be thorough, but with it I hope to reveal another opportunity for further investigation. Western academic culture is complicit in long history of neo-colonial practices of disembodiment. The roots of academia were in training the disembodied white male elite, and thus the technologies of education include technologies of conditioning the body into patterns of reproducing colonial tendencies. Boarding school style institutions were designed to condition the next generation of colonizers, physically, emotionally, and mentally. During my time at
Wesleyan, the shape of the academic, social, and extracurricular experience encouraged disembodiment and distance from emotional experience in an extreme way, and from the perspective of a Dharmic practitioner, one cannot help but see this as a neo-colonial attitude. This is particularly interesting at Wesleyan, because as an institution it is avowedly in favor of decolonization. The primary means that I’ve observed by which academic culture systematically remove students’ attention from their own direct experience are: time pressure, instrumentalization of the body, and normalization of drugs and alcohol.

The “slow” pace of life, such as at a monastery or during meditation, allows subtle emotional and physical sensations to percolate and enter conscious awareness. The inverse of this, which is frenetic, hyperproductivity, encourages a dissociation from the slow and subtle language of body sensation and feeling. People with experiences of the body that are unable to accommodate this pace transfer, leave, or take stimulants (caffeine, amphetamines like ritalin, or adderall) to shape their experience into the kind required to function in a fast-paced environment.

This brings us to the second point: instrumentalization. We are trained to habitually instrumentalize our bodies, utilizing them primary as a means to an end. Even in athletics or dance, time spend in the body is primary goal-oriented and instrumental. At Wesleyan, the vast majority of time spent students spend in direct contact with bodily sensation or non-academic spaces is performative or resume-building. In the gym at the Freeman Athletic Center, all of the cardio machines point inward in a ring around the weight area, and the people in the weight
room all look at the cardio machines. Third-person objectification is built into the structure of the gym. There is more observation external than internal observation in our exercise facilities. Outside of athletics, many people at Wesleyan dance, but this too is highly performative. The body is trained to conform to the aesthetic preferences of others. Singing is embodied and it’s very difficult to find non-competitive singing spaces on campus. Again, it is performative. Music and art at Wesleyan are highly competitive as well. If anything, it would appear that Wesleyan is exceptionally good at commodifying, making time-pressured, and making competitive all the areas of human activity that are traditionally embodied.

Bodily skills are cultivated for external goals. We shape our bodies around practices and routines that harm them, rather than our routines and lives around what our bodies ask for and require. Rather than beginning with the question of what our bodies need, and shaping our lifestyles and practices around that answer, we start with “needs” dictated by capital, productivity, etc, and subjugate the subtle sensations and emotions of the body to those needs. For those interested in de-colonial work, this is profoundly ironic; the way we treat our bodies is the way we will treat other’s bodies. We are learning to treat all bodies as as ignorable, trainable, and as means to an end. When we do this while simultaneously learning critical social theory and philosophy, we are training our bodies and minds in contradictory ways.

The truest “free time” that Wesleyan students is, for many, spent partying. As Bessel van der Kolk pointed out, alcohol and drugs are incredibly popular coping mechanisms for traumatized people. People tend to turn to them in excess when they
are unable to face the emotional realities of sobriety. Little to no emotional processing happens when on drugs. If using drugs at night isn’t enough, you can easily get prescribed medication for the day time. I know students who rotate essentially continuously between a cycle of alcohol, marijuana, adderall, and caffeine. For those that do not go out on Friday or Saturday night, many watch Netflix or consume large amounts of Netflix and online content, all of which provides a constant source of stimulation, making it possible to continually, incessantly, avoid contact with the body. Screens and constant barragement with media provides high-stimulation methods to avoid contact with the body all day.

For students who do make it to CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services), the only kind of therapeutic modality available is talk therapy, which, as we learned through Bessel van der Kolk, is marginally effective when people lack (1) positive, affirming community and (2) embodied practices through which they can re-encounter physical sensation. If my hypothesis, that a person’s degree of embodiment, or comfort and familiarity with bodily sensation, is a good proxy for general mental and emotional well-being, then we might expect young college students to be experiencing a profound degree of psychological distress. This is in fact the case. Over 60% of American college students reported feeling severe anxiety in the last 12 months, and over 42% reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function (ACHA). There’s a mental health crisis on college campuses that grows worse every year, and, apparently, people do not know why or what to do about it, (JED).
For academics and scientists, recognition *embodied knowing* is important because it will affect the way they think about and conduct academic work. But the implications are larger than that. The primary issue at stake is not continually refining more accurate representations of an underlying reality. The world is on a precipice of a disaster of unfathomable proportions. We know what needs to change, but we not know how to bring that change about. Our tools for liberation are not powerful enough, and as a result, it’s easy to fall into despair. We do not know how to liberate the world from suffering as quickly, completely, and radically, as the impending crisis will require. My generation is the one tasked with undoing the global trauma of neo-colonialism, capitalism, and environmental catastrophe because of the time we were born and where we are embodied. But the tools we have been given to help with the project of liberation are grossly inadequate. We need better tools. If we stop shutting our ears, eyes, and minds, we might see that hundreds of thousands of human beings have for millenia devoted their lives to codifying, distilling, and refining the most effective tools for liberation humanity could possibly have imagined. Ignoring the body in academic work is violence. It pretends disembodiment is a default way of living rather than something children in industrialized societies are conditioned into through years of education and discipline. It ignores critiques from non-Western worldviews and participates in an inheritance of violence to the self and others, a pattern of non-seeing and non-hearing. We cannot normalize the brutalization of our own bodies in the name of freeing others, not just become this is uncompassionate but because it is ineffective; a traumatized body is not attuned to others and will only pass
that trauma along. From the perspective of embodied knowing, liberation of the
individual becoming wholly unafraid of bodily experience. It is to be fully incarnate.
To be divine is to be a human body and unafraid. A liberated society is one that
embraces and forgives all of the pain of our history, wholly, at the level of the body,
with no shame.

“The path of embodied knowing begins with the sublime idea that humankind
is divine, and this is one of India’s greatest gifts to humanity,” (Malhotra 56)
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